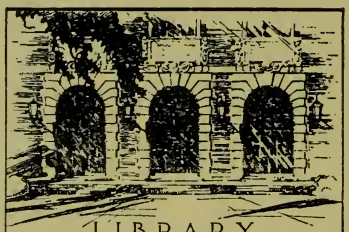

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Through Thick and Thin.

By

Margery Hollis,

Author of
"Anthony Fairfax,"
"Audrey."

In Three Volumes.

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THROUGH THICK AND THIN.

CHAPTER I.

UPHILL.

"Which is the way?
I thank you.—By yon bush?—Pray, how far thither?"
Cymbeline.

THE road ran steeply upward. On either side of it lay a tract of moorland, with here and there a pool, which gleamed grey and cold in the pale light of a sunless May evening. A keen wind blew from the east over the dry brown bracken and the rushes, and a plover

fluttered about, uttering its sharp, querulous cry.

On a heap of stones by the wayside a girl was sitting in a languid attitude, as if overcome by fatigue. This one human figure in the scene was in keeping with the surroundings, and at the same time quite out of harmony with them. The loneliness of the place, the dreariness and discouragement which brooded over it, were reflected in her pale face and drooping figure. But there was a disquiet and anxiety in her eyes and in the tense lines about her mouth, which was in sharp contrast with the calm of the wide sky and the great hills which shut in the valley. Nature was sad and disheartened, but at peace; the human soul which looked out of the dark eyes bent on the heath was restless and disturbed.

She was twenty-three years old, but she looked older, for in her face there was none of the freshness of girlhood, and none of the brightness of expression which comes of freedom from care and responsibility. Her features were good; but she was too thin and colourless to be considered pretty, and just then, with the dragged look which her face wore, she was decidedly plain. Her dress bore the broad arrow of poverty stamped clearly upon it; her clothes were old and very shabby, and not warm enough for the chill air of a northern valley at that season; but every article was scrupulously neat and was carefully put on.

She sat for a few minutes looking listlessly around her; then she took a packet of sandwiches from the little bag she carried, and ate them slowly and languidly.

They were not appetizing, but she must not let herself get too hungry; for at the end of her walk she had a hard task to perform. Then she opened her purse, and carefully counted the few coins in it, and shook her head.

"No," she said to herself, "there isn't enough; I must walk back. I will manage somehow. It is a tremendously long way; I had no idea that five miles could be so far. I wonder whether I am in the right way? I wish I could see somebody to tell me. But there isn't even a house to be seen." She drew out her watch and looked at it. "Well, I will wait ten minutes longer, and then I will try again. I must not be too late."

The ten minutes she had allowed herself had not half run, when a sound of wheels struck her ear, and presently a dog-cart

appeared, drawn leisurely up the hill by a bay horse. The girl rose as the vehicle approached and went forward, and the driver, seeing her intention of addressing him, pulled up.

"Will you kindly tell me whether I am in the right way for Tarn Hall?" she said.

He replied that she was.

"Is it much further?"

"About two miles."

"Thank you very much."

She turned away with an inclination of her head, and was beginning to walk on; but the other, a man about forty, with a pleasant, kindly expression, said—

"I am going past the Hall, and if you care to have a lift, I will drive you with pleasure. This is a lonely road for a young lady."

"Thank you; if it is not taking you

out of your way, I shall be very glad of a lift."

"Not out of my way at all; I must pass the gate," said this good Samaritan, holding out his hand to help her up.

"I shall be very grateful if you will take me so far," she said, with a faint smile. "I am tired, and I want to get there as soon as I can."

The horse moved slowly on up the hill, and his owner occasionally cast glances at the new passenger in the dog-cart. He was curious—curious as a man would naturally feel about a strange and unexplained apparition in a neighbourhood where he knows everybody, gentle and simple, for miles round. Who was she? Where did she come from? His first conjecture, when she asked her way, was that she was a friend or relation of one of the

servants at the Hall; but as he noticed her voice and accent more carefully that theory became untenable. She was a gentlewoman, though she was so poorly clad and was journeying on foot.

Mr. Mildmay knew the family at Tarn Hall well; he knew also all their friends and visitors, and this girl had no place among them. What could be the errand that brought her in such a manner and at such a time to that out-of-the-way dwelling? He felt quite at liberty to speculate about this unknown, for he was pretty sure to hear all about her in a day or two. He was informed of most things that happened at the Hall, and such a visit as this was too noteworthy an occurrence to be passed over in silence.

The object of his curiosity was quite unconscious of the scrutiny he bestowed

upon her. She looked straight before her, with a pondering expression on her face, as if she was giving careful consideration to some difficulty. So absorbed was she in her reflections, that when Mr. Mildmay presently addressed her she started nervously.

"You had better put this rug round you," he said. "It is a chilly evening, and you have been walking."

She wrapped it round her with a word of thanks.

"I am afraid you are very tired. You must have walked a long way."

"Yes, I am tired. I am not used to walking in hilly country."

She did not say how far she had walked. Evidently she was a young woman who could keep her own counsel, and Mr. Mildmay felt a little ashamed of

his hinted question. He drove on in silence for a time.

"This is the gate," he said, checking the horse. "Will you take the reins while I get out and open it?"

"But you were going to drop me here?"

"Oh, I will drive you up to the house. It is very little out of my way."

She hesitated a moment; then she took the reins.

"It is very kind of you," she said gently.

They drove through a small park, in which a few deer browsed, past the sheet of water from which the place took its name, and as they approached the house the stranger looked about her with an air of recognition, as if the features of the landscape were quite familiar to her.

"Here we are," said Mr. Mildmay, as

the dog-cart stopped at the door of a good-sized house of grey stone.

The girl got out quickly, then she turned to him as if on an afterthought.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said, in a mechanical, absent way.

He forgave her for the coldness of her thanks as he looked at her face. It was quite white and full of tense agitation. She was too much engrossed with some serious care to think of smaller things. That troubled anxiety moved him to pity. He felt a momentary inclination to offer to do what he could for her, in case she should not find help at the Hall. But, of course, it is ridiculous to interfere in other people's affairs; so he merely raised his hat and drove away, and the girl mounted the steps with a passionate prayer in her heart—

"Oh, help me, help me, help me! Make them listen to me!"

It was some time before the door was opened in answer to her ring. Tarn Hall had a retired situation high among the hills. Visitors were not numerous there at any time. A visitor at the hour of seven on Sunday evening was unheard of, and the servants marked their disapprobation of the new experience by not hearing the bell. At last, when incredulity could be no longer maintained, a maid reluctantly confronted the ill-advised person who had broken the calm of her Sunday repose.

"Is Mrs. Fletcher at home?" asked the stranger.

The maid replied that she was.

"Can I see her?"

The servant intimated that the untimely caller might enter, and led her across a

wide low hall to a small room wainscoted in light painted wood.

"What name shall I say?" she inquired.

"Miss Rushton," said the stranger, very clearly and distinctly.

Mrs. Fletcher was sitting alone when it was announced to her that a young person who called herself Miss Rushton was in the morning room.

"Rushton?" she repeated, in a tone of dismay. "Are you sure of the name, Martha?"

"Quite sure, ma'am. That was what she said."

"*Miss* Rushton—not Mrs.?"

"Miss Rushton," Martha averred.

"Young, you say?"

"About five and twenty, I should think, ma'am."

"Do you know where Mr. Thornburgh is?"

"He is in the library, ma'am."

Martha withdrew, and Mrs. Fletcher laid down the religious magazine with which she had been edifying herself, and after a pause of reflection went to the library. Through a large window at the west end of that room the light fell on the head of a man of thirty, who was writing at a table.

"Are you busy, Miles? Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all. I can finish these letters to-morrow. Can I do anything for you?"

"Oh, it is so awkward," said Mrs. Fletcher, sinking into an armchair. A look of perturbation sat on her brow which seemed very much out of place there. She was a large, fair woman, with grey

eyes and light hair, who usually looked placid and unruffled. "You remember Sophy?"

"Of course. Have you heard anything of her?"

"A Miss Rushton—I suppose it must be Sophy's stepdaughter—has come here. She is in the house now," said Mrs. Fletcher, solemnly.

"Ah! Well, she was sure to need help some day. Poor Sophy!" said Thornburgh. "If you haven't money enough in the house to give this girl, I can let you have some. She may need help at once."

"N-no, I didn't come to ask you for that," said Mrs. Fletcher. "Would you mind seeing her, Miles? You could judge so much better than I what ought to be done. I shouldn't like to refuse help to Sophy, if she needs it; but, at the same

time, I object to letting her husband make use of her to get anything out of us. This girl is perhaps sent by him, and Sophy may have nothing to do with it. That Mr. Rushton is a thorough good-for-nothing."

"Has he tried to get money from you before?"

"Oh yes; at one time he often made Sophy write, begging for help. Edwin sent them money at first, but he got tired of it, it was plainly such a hopeless business; and he refused to answer any more applications of the kind."

"How long was that ago?"

"It must be about five years. Yes, it was just a year before poor Edwin's death." Mrs. Fletcher sighed, and made a pause. "If this girl doesn't see me," she went on, "it will show her father that we are deter-

mined to have nothing more to do with him. It is very cool to send her here. Will you see her? A man can manage such things so much better than a woman can."

"Well, if you wish it," said Thornburgh, a little reluctantly.

The proposed task was not to his taste; but as Mrs. Fletcher declined it, he was the only person to perform it.

"Oh, thank you, thank you! You will frighten her; she will see that she can't impose upon *you*. I am so thankful that she came while you are here."

"I don't know that I am so alarming," said Thornburgh, laughing. "And perhaps this young person doesn't come to impose upon any one."

"Oh, you may be sure that is her errand," returned Mrs. Fletcher, emphatically.

Thornburgh went to the morning-room, thinking of Sophy Fletcher, whom he remembered a pretty girl, spoilt by her father's indulgence. She had run away when she was twenty, ten years ago, to marry a man to whom her father had refused her, and since then her name had very seldom been mentioned in her old home. She must have led a hard life with the good-for-nothing to whom she had united herself. As Thornburgh recalled the little he had heard about her, and filled up those hints from his knowledge of the world, a great pity for poor Sophy rose in his heart—a pity which inspired him with indignation against her worthless husband, and a stern resolve that he would allow that person to reap as little benefit as possible from anything that might be done for her.

Miss Rushton rose as he entered, and looked at him with an expression of disappointment.

"I asked to see Mrs. Fletcher," she said.

"I am sorry that Mrs. Fletcher cannot see you this evening. If you will kindly tell me what your business with her is, I will inform her of it. I am her cousin—Miles Thornburgh—and I know all the family affairs."

"I have heard of you," said Miss Rushton, gravely. "If Mrs. Fletcher will not see me, I must speak to you."

Miles Thornburgh, as became the *rôle* of cautious judge which Mrs. Fletcher expected him to play, looked sharply at the girl before him, and a very few minutes were enough to put to flight any suspicion that she would attempt to impose upon

him. She was honest; her clear direct glance told that. But her manner did not please him; it was brusque and hard, and not suitable to a suppliant.

"Of course my name tells you what my business here is," she went on after a pause, speaking in a hurried way. "Mrs. Rushton is my stepmother, and I have come to beg her family to do something towards her support. That is my errand, put into plain English."

"I am very sorry to hear that my cousin's husband is in such bad circumstances."

"My father is dead," said the girl, briefly.

"I beg your pardon. I am very sorry," he said instinctively. "I had not heard——"

"No, you could not know; I forgot that. It was three years ago, and we have tried our best to get a living. But it is

hard work—Sophy isn't strong—and I thought that her people might do something for her. They would not like to let her come to want."

"Has she been left quite without provision?"

"Entirely; she has nothing at all," said Miss Rushton, bluntly.

"And she has had to depend on her own exertions?"

It was a shock to think that helpless Sophy had been struggling with the world.

Miss Rushton hesitated; a confused look crossed her face, and she nervously twisted the handle of her bag.

"She has had to do what she could," she said, stumbling over her words. Her manner was not lost on Thornburgh; it awoke the suspicions which he had dis-

missed before. She was concealing or misrepresenting something; perhaps her straightforward look was not to be trusted. "We have kept together and helped each other, but, of course, I cannot do much. And she hasn't the claim on me that she has on her own relations"—with a decided increase of hardness in tone. "That is what I had to say to Mrs. Fletcher. I hope she will inquire for herself into Sophy's circumstances; naturally, I do not expect her to believe my story on my bare assertion. Sophy is living in London at this address."

She rose and pushed a card towards him across the table.

"Thank you; I will see that inquiries are made. Perhaps my cousin is in difficulties at present, and immediate help——"

Miss Rushton shook her head with sharp decision, and hot colour rose in her cheeks.

"No, thank you. I didn't come to beg in that way. I want Sophy's people to do something for her regularly, not to dole out a few pounds now and then. Besides, you should not offer me money. You don't know me. I may be an impostor and not a Rushton at all."

To this speech it was impossible to make any reply. Thornburgh only said that he would be in town in a few days, and would call to see his cousin then. He added an offer of refreshments, which was briefly declined, and Miss Rushton took her departure.

"Oh, you have got rid of her," sighed Mrs. Fletcher, when her ambassador returned to her. "I am so glad you were

here, Miles; I should never have managed so well. What did she say?"

Mrs. Fletcher felt and expressed real concern and sympathy when she heard of her sister-in-law's unhappy case.

"Poor Sophy! How very, very sad! Why didn't she let us know sooner? Of course we must do something for her. I always disapproved of old Mr. Fletcher's will. He ought to have left her something. She behaved badly; but still, she *was* his daughter, and she had a claim for a provision. You told this girl that we would never let Sophy want, of course, Miles?"

"No; I made no promises. She asked for none. She appears to be a young woman with some experience of the world, and she told me that she did not expect me to believe her assertion, and

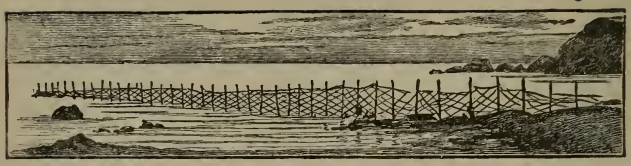
only demanded that we should see for ourselves that her story is true. So I promised to call on Sophy when I go to town."

"I hope at least you gave her some money?"

"I offered her some, but she refused it, and seemed very much offended at the suggestion."

"How ridiculous, to give herself such airs when she came on such an errand!" said Mrs. Fletcher, in a tone of virtuous indignation. She was a generous woman to those in distress; but she had the touch of hardness which comes of unruffled prosperity, and she could not understand or tolerate pride on the part of the needy. "She ought to have been glad to take something back to make her stepmother more comfortable. That poor

girl! Think of her working for her living, Miles! Ah, if she could have foreseen how her disobedience would be punished! She must come to us at once—that will be the best arrangement."



CHAPTER II.

MAKING INQUIRIES.

"Time hath . . . to the world and awkward casualties
Bound me in servitude."

Pericles.

MILES THORNBURGH went to town on Tuesday, and on the following day he paid the visit he had promised to his unfortunate cousin. The address which Miss Rushton had given him was in a poor, shabby street in Camden Town. A frowsy, untidy servant opened the door to him, and on his inquiry informed him that Mrs. Rushton was at home.

"Second floor," added the domestic. "You can't miss your way." And he was left to ascend alone.

The stairs were steep and narrow, uncarpeted, and, so far as the dim light which struggled through a long staircase window showed, not so clean as they should be. Strong odours of cooking floated to his nostrils as he made his way up, in which the perfume of fried kippered herrings blended with that of onions. Poor Sophy! she was indeed punished for her wilfulness and disobedience.

Arrived at the second floor, Mr. Thornburgh knocked at the door that faced the stairs, and being invited to come in, entered. It was a small room with an ugly paper, darkened by smoke and long wear, and very meagrely furnished. There was a square of cheap drugget on

the floor, a table, three cane-bottomed chairs, and an armchair. The table was spread for a meal, and two women were seated at it. They turned to the door with a quick, nervous movement as he appeared, and one of them started up and advanced to meet him.

"I am glad to see you, Miles," she said in a low timid voice. "It is very kind of you to come."

They shook hands, and then he would have bestowed the same salutation on her stepdaughter. But Miss Rushton merely bowed slightly and stiffly.

"I am afraid I am disturbing you," he said, with a glance at the table.

"Oh no, we are only having tea," replied his cousin. "Sit down here"—indicating the armchair. "It is too late to offer you tea, I fear?"

"Thank you, I have had tea. But pray don't let me interrupt you."

Mrs. Rushton resumed her seat at the table, and Thornburgh took the armchair, and looked at her with a perplexed feeling that he had stumbled upon a stranger. Ten years may be expected to make a great change in a person, but Sophy was transformed almost beyond recognition. He remembered her a picture of health and vigour, with a fresh rosy complexion, bright grey-blue eyes and sunny brown hair, full of life and activity, and with the wilful airs and graces of a spoilt child. The little queen, her father used to call her, and she had carried herself with a pretty imperiousness as one accustomed to rule. She was very thin and worn now; her face was pale and her eyes were heavy and sunken, with dark shadows

under them ; her manner was ill at ease and subdued. All queenship had long left this faded shadow.

She asked him a few questions about her relations, to which he gave full and detailed answers ; he was embarrassed by her appearance and surroundings, and felt it difficult to speak at once of her position.

Meanwhile Miss Rushton preserved silence, and steadily ate and drank for a few minutes. Then she rose, and, still silently, withdrew. Thornburgh rose too, when he saw her making for the door, but she was too quick to give him time to open it for her. It would be easier to carry out the purpose of his visit in her absence, and he began straightway.

"I am very sorry to see you here, Sophy," he said gently.

His cousin's eyes filled with tears, and her lips quivered.

"Yes, it is very unlike the home I used to have, isn't it? I am ashamed that any of my people should see me in such a place."

"Have you been here long?"

"About six months."

"You were more comfortable before then?"

"No, we have had to live in this way the last five years."

"Did your husband die so long ago?"

Mrs. Rushton coloured and looked confused.

"He didn't die then, but he left me—he went away," she said in a low tone.

Thornburgh repressed the exclamation of pity and anger which rose to his lips, and she went on—

"We had nothing then—we have been

poorer than you could imagine—oh, Miles, it has been a dreadful time!"

"My dear girl, I wish you had let us know sooner," said Thornburgh, in a tone which expressed more irritation than sympathy. "You might have known that we would not let you suffer so if we could have prevented it."

"But I didn't know that," protested Sophy. "Papa had been so cruel, and Edwin refused to do anything more. And Gay was so against my asking for help—she wouldn't hear of it at one time."

"Gay is your stepdaughter?"

"Yes, her name is Gladys, but she has always been called Gay."

It was a curiously inappropriate name for her, Thornburgh thought, recalling the harassed face and gloomy eyes.

"Well, I hope your hard times are over,

Sophy," he said kindly. "Adelaide was very sorry when she heard of your difficulties, and she wishes you to go to her at once. Here is a letter she sent you—I am sure she will be the kindest of sisters to you."

While Mrs. Rushton read the letter he went to the window, and looked out into the long narrow street. A swarm of children were at play in it, bawling noisily to one another; an old man crawled along, dejectedly offering rhubarb for sale at a penny a bundle; an itinerant coal-dealer was proclaiming his wares in a tone so furious that one might on first hearing suppose he was defying the neighbourhood generally to combat; just opposite there were a few little shops. Everything that struck eye or ear was discordant and hideous.

A girl came out of one of the shops, and he absently watched her as she crossed the street. She carried some parcels—among them a loaf of bread peeped out from its paper covering—and seemed to find her burden heavy as she made her way in face of the wind, which caught her long cloak. Halfway across the street she raised her head and glanced up at the sky, and he recognized Gay Rushton. Her face had not the sullen resolved look which he had seen at Tarn Hall; it wore an expression of dreary discouragement and hopelessness; and he noticed for the first time what delicate refined features she had. She plodded on across the street, and he turned to his cousin, who had had abundance of time to read Mrs. Fletcher's letter.

"You see what Adelaide wishes," he

said. "You must leave this place directly; the sooner you are away the better."

Sophy did not answer at once; she was folding and unfolding the letter with a perplexed air.

"Adelaide is very kind," she said slowly at last. "I don't quite understand what she proposes. Does she intend to take me in for good?"

"Certainly; she wishes you to make your home with her for the future. That will be the pleasantest arrangement for you."

"Oh yes, yes; it is very good of her," in a tone which suggested that the next sentence would be introduced by a "but." "She writes *very* kindly."

"You must fix an early day for going to her. And you can use that," putting an envelope into her hand, "for any immediate expenses."

"Oh, thank you"—reddening faintly. "I don't exactly know when I can go—I must speak to Gay about it. I shall be sorry to leave Gay," she added after a pause. "She will be very lonely when I am gone."

Thornburgh felt surprised at this reference to the step-daughter. He would have expected Sophy to be too overjoyed at the prospect of release from the thraldom of poverty to think of anything else. In her girlhood she had been frankly selfish. He was not moved to admiration by this development of altruism in her. Her regrets struck him as out of place. Her own lot was enough to think of just then, and Rushton's daughter might be left to look after herself. She had not spoken very kindly of Sophy when he saw her at Tarn Hall.

"She will be glad to know that you are comfortable," he rejoined.

"Oh yes, she will; she has always been good to me. But it will be hard upon her."

"But, my dear Sophy, it will make her life easier when she has only herself to work for, and it is not necessary to help you." He suggested the commonsense view of the case.

"Yes, it will make a great difference to her—all the difference in the world. But——" And Sophy still looked melancholy and wistful.

"It is not a parting for good, you know. She can visit you in her holidays."

Sophy brightened a little.

"That would be very nice. I long for her to have a real good holiday. She has never had one since she was eighteen.

When she wasn't working it was no holiday; it was harder than the hardest work. Perhaps Adelaide would let her come to Tarn Hall this summer?"

"I have no doubt she will be glad to see Miss Rushton, as you are so fond of her."

"Of course I am fond of her," cried Sophy, warmly. "For the last five years she has done more for me than anybody else in the whole world has done. I don't know what would have happened to me when I was left if I hadn't had her."

"She has been a great help to you?"

Sophy laughed a little hysterically.

"A help to me! Why, Miles, she has supported me entirely these five years. She was eighteen when her father left us, and I have lived on her earnings since. I couldn't do anything to make money.

I tried, and tried, and tried; but it was all useless. Gay has made our bread all by herself, poor darling!"

"A girl of that age! How could you live on her earnings? What could she do?" he asked bluntly.

Sophy hesitated for a moment.

"She has a good voice, and she sings," she replied. "At one time we hoped that she would do very well; but it is so hard to get on in that line. There are so many singers; and lately she hasn't been strong, and that has affected her voice. She is in the chorus at the Bijou now."

"You must have had a very hard time," said Thornburgh, compassionately.

"It has been awful. But it has been harder for Gay than for me. She has gone short that I might have more," said Sophy, in a faltering voice. "She has

eaten dry bread many a time when she would make me have butter, and she has given me meat when there was none for her." Sophy shed some tears here. To her, brought up in the lap of plenty, nothing could be more pathetic than any privation in daily necessaries. "I wouldn't tell you such things," she added, apologetically, "but I want you to know what Gay is. She would be dreadfully angry with me if she knew I had said anything about her to you; she is so proud and independent. She told me again and again that I was not to mention her to any of you. But I can't leave her in that way; and I hoped if Adelaide did anything for me she would be kind to Gay too——"

"My dear Sophy, I am sure she will," said Thornburgh, heartily. "She will

admire your stepdaughter — as we all must—and she will wish to help her."

"Oh, thank you, Miles; it is *such* a relief to know that," cried Sophy, rejoiced that she had gained the prospect of something more substantial than an invitation to a holiday visit. "If only Gay will let her be kind to her," she subjoined apprehensively. "She is so dreadfully proud. You have no idea how proud she is."

"She ought not to be too proud to accept kindness from your family after showing you so much."

"She thinks my family are against her because she is a Rushton. But she isn't the least bit in the world like her father, Miles—not the least. And"—emphatically, as if to clear Gay entirely from any discredit that might attach to her as a

Rushton—"she couldn't bear her father. Nobody thought worse of him than Gay did."

"You say that she had a strong objection to applying to your people for help. What made her give way on that point? Was it your doing?"

"No; I had nothing to do with it. She made up her mind all at once. It was last Saturday. When she came back from the theatre, she said that she had been thinking that we ought to try again to get my people to do something for me, and she would go off the next day to Tarn Hall. She wouldn't let me write—she said writing was no good—but she would see Adelaide herself and tell her how badly I was off."

"She travelled on Sunday!"

"She couldn't help it, Miles," said

Sophy, deprecating what she supposed to be the disapproval of a zealous Sabbatarian. "You see, it was the only day she could go because of the theatre. I dared not go myself"—frankly. "I should have been ashamed to be seen; and, besides, I *couldn't* have walked from the station to Tarn Hall, and we hadn't money enough to pay for a fly."

"I didn't mean to blame her for travelling then; I was only thinking that she must have come straight to the Hall without any rest. And she walked? She must have been very tired! and hungry too," he mentally added, remorseful at the remembrance that she had departed fasting and on foot.

CHAPTER III.

RUSHTON'S DAUGHTER.

"Sharp was the bread for my soul's nourishing,
Which Fate allowed, and bitter was the spring
Of which I drank."

P. B. MARSTON.

WHEN Thornburgh had taken his leave, Mrs. Rushton's first action was to open the envelope he had given her. She found that it contained bank-notes to the value of £50, and a glow of pleasure overspread her face. In all her life she had never had so much in her possession at once for her own personal use; and after the straitness she had

endured, it seemed a much larger sum than it really was. She cleared the table and put away the cups and saucers—she and her stepdaughter waited on themselves, being too poor to pay for attendance—then she put on her hat and cloak, and went out to taste the first sweetness of her command of money. "Gay shall have a good supper to-night," she said to herself as she descended the stairs.

At midnight Gay entered the house with her latch-key, groped for the candle and matches which she left every night on the passage-table, and having struck a light, made her way softly upstairs. She paused, amazed, on the threshold of the sitting-room. She was accustomed to find it cold and dark at that time; but now there was a bright little fire burning, the lamp was lit, and two candles afforded

a further illumination. The table was set out with the supper, some flowers were carefully arranged to give it a festive air, and her stepmother was smiling a welcome.

"Oh, Sophy, you shouldn't have sat up," exclaimed Gay.

"I couldn't go to bed. Come and get your supper, dear—it's all ready."

"Why have you spent your money in this way?"

"I knew you would say that," returned Sophy, gaily. "I knew you would scold me. But I wanted a little treat for once. Come and sit down. You must be tired to death."

"Well, what did your cousin say?" asked Gay, as she sat down at the table.

Sophy informed her, and gave her Mrs. Fletcher's letter. Gay drew a long sigh

of relief when she had read the kindly sentences.

"That's all right," she said. "You will have an easy time now, Sophy; I am very thankful for it."

"Oh, it will be easier for both of us now, dear," returned Sophy. "You must come to stay with us as soon as you can. I am determined that you shall have a good long rest and holiday."

She looked pleadingly at the girl, but Gay did not meet her eyes, nor reply to her remark.

"Mrs. Fletcher wants you to go as soon as you can," she said in a cool, business-like tone. "You can go very well on Monday. I should write to fix that day."

"My dear Gay, Monday!" gasped Mrs. Rushton. "I couldn't possibly be ready. I must get some things first."

"How much money have they let you have? Fifty pounds? You can easily get clothes enough before Monday. Go to one of the big shops to-morrow and order what you want."

"But, Gay, I am not going to spend all this money on myself," protested Sophy, indignantly. "You need new clothes more than I do. You must have a nice walking costume, and a hat, and new gloves, and an umbrella—oh, and boots; you *must* have them."

"And a silk gown and a Paris bonnet," added Gay, with a laugh. "Hadn't you better throw them in while you are about it? This money won't go so far as you think. No, I'll wait a little for new clothes."

Sophy's face lengthened, her lips quivered, and she laid down her knife

and fork and took out her pocket-handkerchief.

"Oh, Gay, how can you?" she sobbed. "You aren't going to be so unkind as to refuse to let me do *any*thing for you? It is too bad of you to behave so, just when life is beginning to be a little easier for me. I shall have no pleasure in it, if you won't take a little help from me. Why, the first thing I thought of when I counted the money was that now I could get you some proper clothes."

"Don't cry," said Gay, curtly. "I'm not going to refuse help altogether from you." After a pause she added abruptly, "I'll take some of the money, Sophy."

"Oh, thank you, dear!" Sophy embraced her gratefully. "You will have half, won't you?" she added, drawing forth the precious packet.

"No, not quite so much. Give me ten pounds," said Gay, in an uneasy, shamefaced manner.

Sophy entreated her to take more—at least fifteen—but Gay was immovable.

"Miles was very nice," said Sophy, when the money question was settled. "After the first I didn't *much* mind his seeing me here. He is very good-looking; don't you think so?"

"Is he?"—absently.

"Oh, Gay, yes; he is so tall and has such a good figure! And I like his eyes; they are such a nice shade of grey."

Gay was silent; she could never see any beauty in the eyes that had scanned her critically a few days ago.

"You aren't eating anything at all," said Sophy, presently, in a tone of vexation. "I thought you would enjoy some-

thing nice. Have some of this jelly; it really isn't bad. I got the things at Marchant's, the confectioner's. Luckily the shop was open."

"No, thanks; I can't eat any more to-night. I'm not hungry."

"Any more! Why, you've eaten nothing; you've left all the pie I gave you."

"Never mind—I am not hungry," repeated Gay, curtly. "Let us go to bed; I am very tired."

"How did you get on to-night?" asked Sophy, as she rose from the table.

"Oh, pretty well—just as usual," returned the other with a yawn.

A day or two later, Thornburgh went to see his cousin and make arrangements for her journey to the north. He was sure that she would like to have a man to

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deal with the ticket-clerk and porters, so he proposed to see her off from the station.

He intended to make this call serve another purpose. Since he had seen his cousin he had thought a good deal of what she had said about her step-daughter; and it seemed to him that the latter had a claim on Sophy's people which it would be impossibly churlish not to acknowledge. She could not be treated as, before he had come to town, he would have thought it quite natural to treat Rushton's daughter. She could not be quietly dropped and separated from Sophy, nor even left to make her own way unaided; such a course would be brutal. The Fletchers owed her some return for the services she had rendered one of their family; and some return must be made. They could help her pecu-

niarily through Sophy, perhaps. Certainly they must admit her to friendship with them, and give her the support of their countenance; and, as Mrs. Fletcher's representative, he would make Miss Rushton understand the friendly disposition of the family.

The little sitting-room on the second floor looked barer and more poverty-stricken than before, with bright May sunshine searching every corner. He found Gay alone, and was told by her that Sophy was out, but would soon return.

"Then I will wait for her, if you will allow me," he rejoined.

"Certainly. Pray sit down," said Gay.

Her manner was not so ungracious and brusque as it had been at their first meeting. She spoke with formal civility,

as to a person entirely aloof from her. He sat down, and she went on with some sewing she had in hand—she was mending a gown—and remained silent. Evidently she did not think it necessary to entertain him.

"I have to make you a very sincere apology, Miss Rushton," he said presently.

She raised her eyes for a moment with a look of surprise, and then bent them again upon her work.

"Sophy has told me about your journey to Tarn Hall. I feel quite ashamed that you did not find more hospitality there. If I had had the least idea that you had come from town that day and walked from the station, you should not have been allowed to go without refreshment, or to walk back."

"Sophy ought not to have told you

anything about it," said Gay. "It was quite unnecessary to do so."

"You could not expect her to think so little of your generosity in making that journey in such circumstances."

Gay broke off her cotton with a jerk, and made a sharp, impatient movement.

"The journey had to be made," she said briefly. "I did not walk all the way from Bayford. A gentleman gave me a lift in his dog-cart."

"I wish I had known that you were going to take the long walk back to Bayford," said Thornburgh.

She stitched on diligently in silence.

"You must have thought me very dense or very hard."

"I didn't think you either"—in a tone which implied, "I thought nothing about you." "I wanted nothing from you,

except what I got—a hope that you would help Sophy."

"You have been wonderfully good to Sophy," he said.

Gay regarded him with a touch of haughty surprise in her expression, as if asking him how he dared speak of her private affairs, and made him no other answer.

"All her people must admire you, Miss Rushton, and feel grateful to you for your devotion to her," he went on, resolved to say his say.

"I could not help doing what I did," she returned hurriedly. "I was obliged to do it."

"I hope you will remember that we owe you a great debt——" he was beginning, when she cut him short.

"Thanks; but anything of that kind is

out of the question. What I have done—it has been little enough—was between Sophy and me, and other people have nothing to do with it. There is no debt on your part. You need not feel it necessary to pay me off."

"I did not mean to put it that way. I wished you to feel that we are your friends."

"How can any of you be friends to me—a Rushton?" she said bitterly. "I know how you all regarded my father. Sophy talks of my going to stay at Tarn Hall. Poor dear! she can't help seeing things as she wishes to see them, and she has forgotten Fletcher prejudices. But I know quite well that common friendliness is impossible between Sophy's people and myself."

"You take an exaggerated view——"

"Pray say no more about it. You have satisfied your conscience by promising me the kindness and notice of the Fletchers; but I don't want them. There is nothing more to be said. It wasn't for anything for myself that I went to Tarn Hall."

There was a silence after that speech. Thornburgh did not very well know what to reply to Gay's uncompromising declaration. He was surprised to find that she cherished such hostility towards Sophy's people, and decidedly annoyed by the fact. It was provoking to have one's benevolent and amiable intentions met in this way.

He was glad to hear steps coming up the stairs. Sophy was returning, and would free him from this *tête-à-tête.*

Sophy came in quickly. She looked

flushed and excited, and after hurriedly greeting Thornburgh, she turned to her stepdaughter.

"Oh, Gay, how could you keep me in the dark?" she burst out indignantly. "If I hadn't seen Fanny Gresham by the merest chance, I should never have known. You would have let me go away without a word. *This* is why you were so anxious to send me off next week. Oh, I see now!" she ended, with a half sob, half laugh.

Gay did not answer. She was sitting with her work on her lap and her hands lying idle on it. They had trembled too much to put in a stitch since her last words had been spoken. She rose and was going towards the door, but she stumbled at the first step. Sophy sprang forward, threw her arm round the girl,

and laid her on the floor—the only place in the room where she could lie at full length.

"Open the window, Miles; she has fainted. No wonder; she must have had an awful time lately with that on her mind. Just think of it! she has lost her situation at the theatre, and she never told me. I heard of it from a girl in the chorus. They gave her notice because her voice has been weak lately. She has been too worn out and ill to sing. And she would have let me go away in ignorance, and would have stayed here and quietly starved, she is so proud. Oh, Gay, Gay, my darling! As if I would leave you now! I won't go on Monday; I will stay with you."

Sophy did not put all her energy into her fluent words. While she cried and

talked, she was unfastening Gay's bodice at the throat, bathing her head and face with cold water, and rubbing her hands.

"Can I do anything?—get anything?" asked Thornburgh.

"No, thank you; she is coming round," returned his cousin. And in a few seconds Gay opened her eyes.

"You are better, dear?" said Sophy, gently.

"I'm all right. What is it? Oh, I remember."

"Oh, you must not try to get up. Lie still," entreated Sophy.

But Gay weakly struggled to her feet, and grasped the back of a chair, waving aside Thornburgh, who instinctively started forward to help her.

"No, thanks; I am better."

As she stood there, white and shaking,

not able to stand alone, yet resolutely refusing his support, he thought that he had never seen anything feminine that impressed him so vividly with the idea of strength of will.

"Please help me into the other room, Sophy," she said.

Sophy obeyed, and presently returned.

"She is lying down now," she said. "Oh, Miles, isn't she a heroine? She must have been frantic with anxiety, for how is she to get another engagement while her voice is so weak? and yet she never said a word about it to me. She kept it all to herself. They gave her a fortnight's notice last Saturday, and she went off to Tarn Hall on Sunday to prevent me from suffering."

"That is a step that ought to have been taken years ago," said Thornburgh,

harshly. The pity which the sight of Gay's unconscious face had roused in him was so keen that it was a relief to be angry. "It was simply silly that you and she should get into such straits."

Sophy burst into tears.

"Indeed, Miles, I don't see how we could have helped it. Edwin refused—positively refused in the unkindest letter—to do anything more for me. When Gay saw the letter, she vowed that we would never ask any of my people for a penny."

"You might have understood that when you were left alone the case was quite altered," Thornburgh maintained. "If he had known your position, Edwin would never have allowed you to depend on the exertions of a child."

"Gay wasn't exactly a child," said

Sophy, who had a fine talent for being literal. "She was quite grown up, and knew far more about practical life than I did."

"It is a pity that she didn't know she was undertaking more than she ought to attempt," said Thornburgh. "She looks awfully ill," he added abruptly. "She must be quite out of health."

"I am afraid she is; I never knew her faint before. I can't go away while she is in this state. I must stay and nurse her. It would be too cruel to leave her."

"Of course you cannot leave her, but it will do no good for you to stay here. She must go with you. She will never get well in these quarters. I will write to Adelaide and ask her to invite Miss Rushton."

Sophy looked dubious.

"I'm afraid Gay won't like that. She seemed so decided against going to Tarn Hall."

"Well, then, suppose you take her to the seaside. I shall be very glad if you will let me take lodgings for you, and be my guests there. And," cutting short Sophy's thanks, "you must get a doctor for her. She ought to see one. Is there anybody you would like to call in?"

No; Sophy knew of no doctor that she preferred.

"I will send Dr. Brett then—he is considered good for the chest and throat."

"You are very kind, Miles, but—I am afraid—Gay is so independent, she won't like to accept anything from you. And she hates having any fuss about her health. She will refuse to see this doctor—I *know* she will!"

"Don't listen to her if she does refuse. Can't you make her do what is good for her? Have you never had any authority over her?"

"I don't think I ever had," said Sophy, in a helpless tone. "I am sure I couldn't *make* her do anything."

"Persuade her, then. She must have proper attention. She can't be allowed to fall ill out of sheer wilfulness," said Thornburgh, irritably.

"I will do what I can. I will tell her that she must do everything possible to get her voice back," said Sophy, musingly. "She will care for that; it is the one thing she has to get her living by."

"Ay, I should say that would be a powerful argument with her."

CHAPTER IV.

BEATEN.

"Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks."

Hamlet.

PERHAPS Thornburgh would have restrained himself if he had foreseen that every word he said about Gay would come to her ears. His free criticism on the proceedings of Sophy and her stepdaughter had deeply disturbed the former, and she sought relief for her agitation by confiding the cause of it to Gay.

In the process of repetition Mr. Thornburgh's remarks rather gained than lost in

pungency. Gay learnt that he thought her attempt to support her stepmother had been a piece of folly, and that he blamed her wilfulness and want of sense for all that the two women had gone through.

"He was quite unjust," complained poor Sophy; "he said I ought to have some authority over you."

Gay had listened, lying with closed eyes and a weary, passive expression, apparently unmoved. At this item in Mr. Thornburgh's fault-finding she faintly smiled.

"Never mind, dear," she said gently. "If he knew me, he would know that it was very unfair to expect you to have authority over such a wilful person."

"He might see that himself," said Sophy. "I am sure he would have no more authority over you than I have."

"I am sure he wouldn't."

"But, Gay dear, to please me you will see this doctor he talked of sending. I should so like to tell Miles that you made no objection when I asked you to see him. He is very good for the chest and throat, and he may make your voice quite strong again."

There was a pause. Then Gay said—

"I will see him, but it is quite unnecessary that he should come here. I can go to his house well enough, and I would rather do so."

She persisted in this, and Sophy wrote to her cousin to ask him to make an appointment for a consultation. When the doctor had examined Gay, his verdict was that she must rest for several months; her voice was quite unequal to the strain of public singing. There was no disease

of throat or lungs at present, but she was thoroughly run down and needed great care. She must have change, country air, and generous diet.

After this Sophy told her of Thornburgh's proposal that they should be his guests at the seaside. She had prudently refrained from speaking of the future till she could do so with the doctor's opinion to support her persuasions.

"What made him propose that?" asked Gay.

"I told him that you disliked the idea of going to Tarn Hall, and he suggested at once that I should take you to the seaside. He is really very kind. He said we could not have you falling ill out of——"

Sophy pulled up here, a little confused.

"You haven't finished," said Gay.

"What else did he say? You could not have me falling ill out of what?"

"Sheer wilfulness," finished Mrs. Rushton.

Gay laughed.

"He *is* kind," she said. "He understands so well how a person in my place feels."

"Well, it would be wilful of you to refuse to go away after what the doctor has said."

"Oh, how can I refuse?" said Gay, in a petulant tone. "If I refuse, there is only one thing for me just now."

"What is that?"

"The workhouse."

"Oh, Gay, how can you?"

"I must take what is offered me; beggars cannot be choosers."

Sophy remonstrated against her calling

herself a beggar, and pointed out that she could choose in this case. She might fix on any watering-place she liked, or she could go to Tarn Hall. Adelaide had written a very kind letter inviting her to stay there.

"You might be worse off, Gay," she remarked, with a gallant effort to administer wholesome rebuke.

"That's very true," said Gay. "If it were the workhouse, I should have no choice of place. I will go to Mrs. Fletcher's, Sophy; I prefer that to going to the seaside."

"Really, dear?"

"Yes, really. It will cause less trouble and expense."

"Oh, the expense would be nothing to Miles; he wouldn't mind it at all."

"But I mind it," said Gay, drily. "I

don't want any of his money. He has a house near your old home, hasn't he?" she added after a pause.

"Yes, Thornburgh Hall. It isn't a big house, but it is very old, and has been in the family for hundreds of years. Miles seems to spend a good deal of time in town; I suppose he finds Thornburgh dull."

Gay made ready to leave London, with bitterness unspeakable in her heart. It was hard to be defeated in her struggle with the world, and she felt it almost harder that her defeat was known, and that she must be pitied for it.

For some years an application to the Fletchers for help had seemed to her a step to which she could only be driven as a last expedient in desperate straits, an ignominy which was to be avoided at

any price. She hated the Fletcher family with the uncompromising thoroughness of youth, and a nature embittered by early acquaintance with misfortune. They had despised her father and treated him ill. Sophy had been quite right in saying that nobody thought worse of Mr. Rushton than his only child did. Gay had known him better than most people had done, and she had read his character with a clearness which was unsoftened by any pretty illusions of filial affection. His want of principle revolted her; his laziness and selfishness excited her deepest scorn. But though she would probably have given a harder judgment of her father than the Fletchers had ever formed, she felt none the less hostile towards them for their contempt of him; partly because she knew that they disapproved

of Sophy's marriage more on account of his poverty than his indolence, partly because she thought that they might have helped him to become a more respectable member of society. If he had had their countenance, he would not have gone downhill so fast as he did after his second marriage. They had made him reckless. This was no excuse for her father — Gay scorned the weakness of nature which had let others have power to mar his life; if she had been in her father's place, the low esteem of the Fletchers would have been a goad impelling her to show them that it was undeserved—but it was a good reason for her dislike of them.

Another reason had been supplied by their harshness to Sophy. Her father had cast her off, never answered one of

her entreaties for forgiveness, nor one of her appeals for help; her brother, after doling out a few sums, had written refusing to do anything more.

It had been a sharp letter. Edwin Fletcher had written it in a fit of exasperation at applications which he believed to come from his brother-in-law, and had expressed himself for that gentleman's benefit. But the harsh sentences which declared that Sophy had forfeited all claim on her family, and must not expect anything from them for the future, never reached Mr. Rushton, who had then left the country; they were read only by the two young women whom he had deserted.

"You will never write again, Sophy," said Gay, tearing the letter across.

"No, indeed," said Sophy, who never opposed her stepdaughter when she had

that white look of anger on her face. "It would be of no use if I did," she added practically.

"Not the least; they won't do anything for you. Oh, Sophy dear, I am sorry they are so cruel to you."

Sophy wept; her tears always came readily for her own troubles.

"Never mind," said Gay. "I shall get on soon, dear. I will take care of you."

Gay made that promise with her whole heart. She was very fond of her helpless young stepmother. She had been Sophy's stay and support all through her married life, cheering her in the pecuniary crises which were chronic in the Rushton household, facing creditors whose angry demands frightened Sophy out of her wits, working with her own hands to keep up a little domestic comfort, consoling

her under her husband's neglect, and stoutly taking her part when Mr. Rushton was in a bad temper. It was Gay's doing that Sophy had not been altogether crushed by the miseries which her rash marriage brought upon her, and Sophy clung to her with a grateful affection which was the warmest feeling she had ever experienced.

Gay had done her utmost to take care of Sophy. She had a good voice, and at one time it had seemed that brighter days were dawning for her. She had been singled out of the chorus to play a small part in the opera. For a time she did very well, and she was beginning to think of better parts, when she caught cold, and was obliged to give up singing for a time. After that her voice was not equal to solos, and she had to return to the chorus.

Then her voice grew weaker and uncertain; now and then she sang out of tune; at last came her dismissal.

She was beaten, and in her extremity she had to turn to the Fletchers. There was no other way of getting bread for Sophy. She would appeal to their pride, as it was hopeless to appeal to their affection, and shame them, if it were possible, into providing for her.

But she was resolved not to let them know that she wanted help; they should never regard her as a beggar for herself. She would keep her dismissal a secret from Sophy, and to that end she tried to hasten her stepmother's departure.

But her effort to hide her need proved futile, and she was forced to accept benefits from the Fletchers. She could not do so graciously or willingly. She felt that they

offered her food and shelter simply because they could not avoid it. What they did was extorted from their sense of propriety. They could not, for their own credit, leave her to want; as, unfortunately, she had done something for Sophy and was connected with them, they acknowledged a claim on her part. "If I were quite well and able to work for myself," Gay put it in her thoughts, "they would never have asked me to their house. It is only because I am in positive want, coming face to face with starvation, that they will have anything to do with me."

Sophy's departure was not long delayed by her stepdaughter. Only a few days after the day originally fixed for the journey, Mr. Thornburgh carried out his amiable intention of speeding his cousin on her way. He met the two ladies at

Euston, and did all that man could do to save them trouble.

Sophy thanked him warmly for his goodness.

"It is *such* a comfort to have a man to look after one," she said. "I was so glad to hear you would see us off, though Gay said it was quite unnecessary that you should."

"That is just what I should have expected Miss Rushton to say," remarked Thornburgh, looking at Gay with a smile. "She is quite morbidly independent."

"I thought it a pity that you should have the trouble of coming," said Gay. "It really isn't a great exertion to take two tickets and to see that the luggage is labelled."

"But as Miles is so kind as not to mind

the trouble, we are very glad to have him," said Sophy.

"Oh yes, very glad! It is very kind of Mr. Thornburgh," said Gay, in a mechanical manner, which made her acknowledgment a very perfunctory civility.

When a compartment was found for the travellers, Gay took her place at once in it, while Sophy went to the bookstall to get a paper. Her cousin had bought half a dozen already for her, but he had not procured the special lady's journal which she honoured with her liking, and she took more interest in descriptions of smart gowns than in articles dealing with such minor matters as politics, literature, or art.

"I hope you will soon be stronger, Miss Rushton," said Thornburgh.

"Thank you," replied Gay, languidly.

"I hope you will enjoy yourself at Tarn Hall."

"Thank you."

"You will like my cousins when you know them. The eldest daughter will be a pleasant companion for you. I think you will soon believe that you have found friends there."

Gay made no answer to this, and after waiting a few seconds for a reply, he strolled away. Miss Rushton herself was not a pleasant companion, certainly.

CHAPTER V.

AT TARN HALL.

"Es war die erste Musse meines Lebens."
Wallenstein.

A CARRIAGE was waiting for the travellers at the Bayford station, and they were driven fast along the roads which Gay had traversed slowly and painfully less than a fortnight ago. It was much warmer than it had been then; the sun was shining in a cloudless sky, and masses of hawthorn blossom made the hedges white, and scented the soft air.

Sophy looked about her, exclaiming with pleasure as she recognized the

familiar features of the landscape, in a state of flutter and agitation; Gay leaned back and looked before her with a white set face. It was inexpressibly painful to see the bits of the road that she knew again; it made her feel afresh the shame of that pilgrimage of bitterest mortification.

"This is a very long hill," said Sophy, settling herself comfortably in her corner as the horses slackened pace. "When we get to the top we shall not be far from Tarn Hall. You would find it hard work to climb this hill, Gay dear?"

Yes, it had been very hard work.

"You look so tired," went on Sophy, noticing the girl's face. "Do lie back and put up your feet. There's somebody coming. I wonder whether it is anybody I know."

The "somebody" was driving a dog-cart down the hill, and as he passed the Tarn Hall carriage he looked at the ladies with some embarrassment in his ruddy face, and took off his hat. Sophy coloured and hastily returned the salutation, and turning her eyes away, saw that Gay had flushed a little.

"Why, Gay, do you know that gentleman?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"I have seen him before. It was he who drove me up to the Hall."

"Oh!"

Sophy looked a little disconcerted; she would evidently have preferred that this person had not shown her stepdaughter that kindness.

"It is Mr. Mildmay," she said. "He is a relation of Miles Thornburgh—Miles's mother was his cousin. I used to know

him very well once. He has altered a good deal. Here we are at the top of the hill," she said presently, with recovered sprightliness. "Look at the view, Gay; you can see the Coniston Range so well here."

Grey and purple the distant mountains rose against the bright blue sky. Sophy was silent as they were driven on; even her slight nature seemed to feel at last the pain and embarrassment of this return to her old home. She was nervous and tearful when the carriage stopped before the door of the house.

"Oh, Gay, how long it seems since I saw it last!" she whispered, instinctively turning to her sole support in that long time. "Poor papa! Oh, I little thought——"

"There is some one coming to meet

you, dear," said Gay, gently, recalling her to the present.

Sophy sprang out, and hurried towards the lady who was descending the steps. Mrs. Fletcher greeted her prodigal sister-in-law warmly; even Gay, who looked on anxiously at the meeting, could not find anything wanting in her manner, or fear that Sophy would not be treated with abundant kindness.

Then Mrs. Fletcher turned with a smile to her second guest and shook hands cordially.

"I am very glad to see you, my dear," she said. "I hope you are not much tired with your journey."

Behind her mother came Mabel, the eldest daughter, a fair girl with fresh country roses on her cheeks, flaxen hair coiled round her head, and a serene

expression in her grey-blue eyes. She greeted the new-comers pleasantly, and led Gay up to her room. It was charming, with its air of dainty freshness. The curtains and chair covers were white and pink; there was a bunch of roses on the dressing-table. It was as sharp a contrast as could be devised to the dingy bare room which Gay had left that morning.

"Tea will be ready directly," said Mabel. "I will come back and show you the way to the drawing-room. They have brought up hot water for you. Are you sure you have all you need?"

Gay laid aside hat and jacket and washed her face and hands, feeling quite at a loss. She had prepared herself to be slighted by her hosts, and was ready to endure in stoic calm the consciousness that they would rather be without her. It

threw her out of all her reckonings to be received as a welcome guest, with no chill or constraint of manner.

Mabel presently returned, and conducted her downstairs. During tea, Sophy and Mrs. Fletcher talked of family affairs and friends, and Mabel devoted herself to Gay's entertainment.

Had she had a pleasant journey? It was very tiring to travel by rail. Did she play tennis much? Ah, of course, one hadn't always room in a town. But the newest thing was golf, "and I like it much better than tennis," said Mabel. "We have had a course laid out in some fields near the house, and it is great fun. You must learn to play—it is capital exercise."

Gay listened and answered, and felt as if she were dreaming, so strange to her was it to be prattling in this simple way, as if

life were such an easy business that golf and tennis were things of importance.

In the pauses of Mabel's chat, scraps of the talk between the two elder ladies came to her ears. Mrs. Fletcher was giving information about the people of the neighbourhood, telling how this one was married and that one was dead.

"We passed Mr. Mildmay on the road," remarked Sophy. "He looks a good deal older. Of course *he* is married?"

"He married eight or nine years ago. His wife was very delicate, and she died five years after. There is one child, a little boy. Lucy Mildmay keeps house for her brother now."

"It is a world of trouble," said Sophy, with decorous gloom.

Mrs. Fletcher sighed with the enjoyment of a woman who has had losses and

got over them so well that nothing of grief remains but its dignity.

"Ah yes, indeed," she murmured. "We all learn that."

After tea Sophy professed an earnest desire to see the rest of the family.

"I will send for them," said Mrs. Fletcher.

"Oh, pray don't; let us go to the schoolroom. I should like to see it again," said Sophy. "You would like to see the younger ones, wouldn't you, Gay?" with an appealing glance. Sophy was very anxious that her stepdaughter should appear amiable and be liked by her people.

Gay assented willingly enough. Mabel's fair face, with the childlike calm in the eyes, had taken her fancy, and she would like to see the sisters, who probably resembled her.

They went across the wide low hall where the door stood open to the garden, and down a passage to a cheerful room with chintz-covered furniture.

"This," said Mrs. Fletcher, "is Clara. She is like Edwin, I think, Sophy; don't you see the likeness?"

Sophy saw it very clearly. Clara was a tall girl of fifteen, who gave promise of developing ample proportions when she had attained her full growth. She was fair and rosy, and not so pretty as Mabel.

"And here is Bridget—she is a sad bookworm," as a slender damsel of twelve came forward, holding a book in her left hand.

She had long arms and legs, and straight nut-brown hair on her shoulders, and she went through the greetings in an absent manner as if they were an irksome inter-

ruption, with none of the smiles which Clara had worn. But there was something very sweet in the dreamy gaze of her soft brown eyes, and Gay found her as attractive as her eldest sister.

Altogether Gay's first impressions of the Fletcher family were very pleasant, and the pleasantness did not wear off on further acquaintance. Their kindness continued, and grew warmer as they knew her better and became more familiar with her. They were not demonstrative; so far as Gay could see, Sophy was the only member of the family that was; but their behaviour was more grateful to Gay than any fussy show of liking could have been. They accepted her as a matter of course. They showed no curiosity about her former life, and no consciousness that there was any difference between her and their friends

in the neighbourhood; and she soon began to feel herself at home in the household.

She was very susceptible to outward influences, and she found the peace of the atmosphere that surrounded her infinitely soothing. The leisurely way of life, the sense of ease and comfort, the calm of the country scenes, lulled her into a state of blissful quiet. For a time she laid her anxieties and cares aside, and forgot the painful, grim realities which hitherto had made up her life. She took the full good of this pause, and enjoyed it, shutting her eyes to the future. That could never be quite so bad as the past had been, for Sophy would be safe in this quiet haven, and Gay would have to provide only for her own subsistence.

There was only one thing in her present conditions of life that she would have

liked to be altered, only one respect in which her entertainers did not please her, and this was that they often talked of Mr. Thornburgh.

In this resting-place which kind Fate had given her, Gay would have preferred to have no reminder of old times, and Thornburgh was the person that was most closely connected with them in her mind. He had seen her when things were at their very worst—when she had made that painful journey and bent her pride to beg for Sophy; he had seen the miserable London lodgings, and knew how low poverty had brought them.

It made Gay feel hot if any incident of those meetings flashed across her mind; the memory of every word and look of his stung her with humiliation. If it had been a woman, kind and gentle like Mrs.

Fletcher or Mabel, that had been witness of that episode, she could have borne it with less shame; but that it was all known to this man, who was so prosperous himself that poverty must appear simply sordid and degrading to him, was intolerable. She would have liked never to hear Thornburgh's name again.

But unluckily he was the person that was oftenest mentioned by all the Fletchers. "Cousin Miles" was the great authority at Tarn Hall. Mrs. Fletcher consulted him upon all points on which she found a man's advice necessary, and followed his advice; the girls looked up to him with open admiration as a model of what a man should be and the pride of the family; his opinion decided a question; he was quoted on every occasion. It was possible for an outsider who saw much of the home

life at Tarn Hall to get rather tired of Mr. Thornburgh, and Gay grew very weary of him.

His relations could have wished for one change with regard to him; they would have liked him to be more at Thornburgh Hall.

"It would be so nice if he lived there," said Clara; "but he says he must go to town because of his work."

"What is his work?" asked Gay. "Sophy thought that he had no profession."

Clara explained. He hadn't a profession exactly, having no need of one. He had read law, and been called to the bar, but he had done nothing at that; and he occupied himself in writing. He wrote for a weekly paper, and contributed to magazines, and he was very

clever indeed at it, said Clara, emphatically.

Gay was sorry to hear this account of Mr. Thornburgh. She would have preferred him to be an idler, caring only for sport; and she grudged him his success. He did not know the bitter pang of failure—he had too many good things.

When she had been about a month at Tarn Hall, it was announced that Thornburgh was coming north. The Fletchers rejoiced greatly. Each in her different way expected some pleasure from his presence among them. Mrs. Fletcher had several things to talk over with him; Mabel would ride with him; Clara declared her intention of coaxing him into saying that it was advisable that she should learn the violin.

"Are you glad he is coming, Bridget?" said Gay at last, with a hope that the child, who had been silent about this admirable relation, felt a refreshing indifference on the subject.

"Oh yes," said Bridget, heartily. "He always brings me nice books, and he promised to bring me 'Westward Ho!' this time."

"Perhaps he will forget," suggested Gay, only half in jest.

Bridget paused as she turned over a leaf.

"Cousin Miles never forgets," she said gravely.

"What a marvellous memory!" said Gay, shrugging her shoulders.

"He writes down the names of the books in his pocket-book," Bridget explained.

Then she returned to the adventures of Quentin Durward, and was lost to all else.

Thornburgh arrived at his house on Tuesday, and it was expected, as a matter of course, that he would come to Tarn Hall the next day.

"If he doesn't come to luncheon, he will come soon after," remarked Mrs. Fletcher.

He did not appear at luncheon, and when the meal was over, Gay proposed to join the schoolroom party in their walk. She often went with them, for Mabel was usually engaged in the afternoon, helping her mother to receive callers or making calls with her, and Gay avoided taking any part in those ceremonies. She was possessed by a painful shyness towards the neighbours of the Fletchers, and could not endure the thought of being examined

and criticized by people who had heard what manner of man her father was.

Her offered company was gladly accepted by Miss Lorton, the governess, and her charges, but Gay's little attempt at strategy did not do so much for her as she desired. She professed a strong wish to take a walk long enough to keep them out till the time of schoolroom tea, hoping thus to avoid an encounter with Mr. Thornburgh; but the girls, who were generally very ready to gratify any fancy she expressed, insisted on cutting their walk short. They must see Cousin Miles. After that point had been settled, Gay found less pleasure than usual in strolling through the woods, though they were at their loveliest. The trees were in full fresh leafage, the bracken grew high, and masses of red campion glowed in vivid colour.

When they returned to the house, they found the rest of the family taking tea on the lawn.

"There's Cousin Miles," cried Clara, joyfully, and hurried over the grass.

Bridget followed, drawing Gay, whose arm she held, with her; and Gay yielded to the guiding hand, telling herself impatiently that it was very silly to feel so averse from an inevitable meeting, and wondering a little that she, who had done so many disagreeable things in her life, should shrink from what was really a trifle.

She was annoyed by her weakness, but the weakness was very natural. She had received a strong impression about Thornburgh when her nerves were in a state of morbid excitement, and she had not yet recovered from that overstrained condi-

tion, and could not regard him in a new light.

She answered his inquiry about her health, and then took refuge in a seat a little behind Sophy, while his attention was claimed by Clara and Bridget, who implored him to ask their mother to let them have tea with their elders.

Mrs. Fletcher gave permission.

"You must tell Miss Lorton what you are going to do. You go, Bridget."

"Let me go instead of Bridget; it seems a pity to disturb her," said Gay, smiling at the little girl, who had taken possession of a comfortable low chair.

"Thank you, my dear," said Mrs. Fletcher, placidly.

Thornburgh followed Gay with his eyes as she crossed the lawn.

"Ah," he said, in a tone of satisfaction, "you have tamed her, I see."

"Tamed her!" ejaculated Clara. "What do you mean, Cousin Miles?"

Mrs. Fletcher's placidity was disturbed, and she turned an inquiring look on her cousin.

"Oh, I only mean that you have made her believe in your friendliness and like you, Clara," he said. "I was afraid she would be very shy of you all for a time."

"Oh, indeed, she took to the girls at once," said Sophy, hurriedly. "I never knew her like people so much before. And she is enjoying herself so. It is delightful to see how much better she looks since she came. You should hear what she says of Adelaide's kindness."

"She is very shy," observed Clara.

"You were quite right about that, Cousin Miles. She will never see callers, and she won't go in to late dinner if anybody is dining here."

"No, she is not quite tamed yet," added Bridget.

"I shouldn't let her shut herself up in that way," said Thornburgh to the elder ladies. "She will only mope."

"It is her own wish to do so," rejoined Mrs. Fletcher; "and, of course, we like her to please herself."

"We have tried to persuade her to see more people, but she always begs off," said Mabel.

Later, Mrs. Fletcher took an opportunity of speaking aside to Thornburgh.

"Miles, when you saw Miss Rushton in London, did you think her at all—slangy or rough?" she asked.

"Oh dear, no; not at all!" he returned.

"I was rather alarmed when you said we had tamed her. I thought you might mean more than you chose to say to the children—that her manner was quieter and more presentable."

"Her manner was quite quiet when I saw her before, I assure you, Adelaide. I meant just what I said. She seemed to think that the Fletchers could not be friends to her father's daughter, and she was a little *farouche* to me in consequence"—with a laugh. "I was afraid she would be stiff and ill at ease among you, that was all."

"I was rather reluctant at first to have her with the girls. I feared she might be vulgar—belonging to such a family," said Mrs. Fletcher. "If you found her at all

so—she would be less on her guard with a man, and you could judge better than I —I would rather know. I should not like the girls to get any harm from her."

"But I did not think her in the slightest degree vulgar," declared Thornburgh. "On the contrary, she impressed me as decidedly refined. I am sure the girls will not learn anything unladylike from her."

Mrs. Fletcher's fears for the manners of her daughters were calmed by this emphatic assurance.

"I have seen nothing that I could object to in her," she acknowledged; "and I watched her very carefully at first. I was naturally more anxious after Sophy told me what her occupation had been. It does not seem to have hurt her; but it is a thousand pities that she ever took to

such a life. We have not mentioned it to anybody. Even Mabel does not know. You won't speak of it?"

"Of course not."

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE MUSIC.

"Will you sing?
More at your request than to please myself."
As You Like It.

A WEEK later there was a dinner-party at Tarn Hall; and Mrs. Fletcher expressed so strong a wish that Gay should be present at it that Gay found it impossible to refuse. Mrs. Fletcher and Sophy had decided that as Miles disapproved of Miss Rushton's seclusion, it would never do to permit her any longer to indulge her morbid inclination to keep in the background.

"I am so glad you will come in to dinner, dear," said Sophy. "It will do you good to see more people, and it will please Adelaide. Miles said we ought not to let you shut yourself up. It is bad for you."

Gay frowned impatiently. It was, if Mr. Thornburgh would only consider it, very bad for her to have him interfering in her affairs as if she were a Fletcher. It tried her temper sorely.

"Miles is so kind," prattled on Sophy. "He is so valuable to Adelaide. She is very fortunate in having him to arrange things for her. It is so nice to be able to consult a man."

"Well," said Gay, "I have no doubt you might enjoy that privilege, Sophy. Mr. Thornburgh seems liberal with his advice. He would be delighted to bestow it upon you."

"Yes, dear, I am sure he would; and I feel it a great comfort"—earnestly.

"When he is generous enough to look after a humble outsider like myself, he will certainly do more for one of the family."

"Oh, I think he likes you, Gay," said Sophy, reassuringly. "I am sure he does. He seems to take quite an interest in you. He said he was glad to see the girls had tamed you."

Gay threw back her head in haughty annoyance; the phrase did not please her, and she was about to question further. But she reflected that it would be a difficult matter to gain an understanding of the context of the objectionable words from Sophy, whose talk, never of the clearest, was always specially confused when she was called on for an explanation,

and that it would be wise to spare herself the mortification of hearing some unflattering criticism that had been pronounced on her by Mr. Thornburgh. No doubt she did seem rough compared to Mabel, with her serene air; she felt the difference herself quite as keenly as any one else could feel it.

On the evening of the dinner-party, Sophy dressed early and went to her stepdaughter's room to assist in her toilet.

She was in a state of fussy anxiety as to the impression which Gay might produce upon her old friends and neighbours. She was well aware that, as a Rushton, Gay would be exposed to severe criticism; she felt apologetic in advance for all the deficiencies that would be found in her stepdaughter; and she was eager that she should make as good an appearance as

could be managed. If the neighbourhood should acknowledge that Gay was passable, it would be a great relief to her mind, and lift off some of the public disapproval of her luckless marriage.

It was a serious grief to her that Gay's attire was not equal to the occasion. She had been obliged to get some new clothes before she came to Tarn Hall, but she had resolutely bought the very cheapest that would do, and the one evening gown that she had provided herself with was of black stuff and very plainly made. Sophy would fain have persuaded her to get a new gown for this evening. She would look better in white or pale pink than in gloomy black; and when Gay firmly refused to lay out a penny in that way, she besought the girl to borrow some white lace from Mrs. Fletcher, who, she

was sure, would gladly lend it, to trim the bodice and sleeves. But Gay was as the deaf adder to this appeal also, and Sophy felt resentfully that it was too bad of Gay not to try to do her credit, and take away some of her reproach among the neighbours. A well-dressed, nice-looking stepdaughter would prove that the Rushtons were not so wholly out of the pale as the Fletchers' friends believed; a shabby dowdy would confirm them in their low esteem of her husband.

She had another motive—less selfish and personal—for wishing that Gay should make a good impression. Now and then, since she had come to Tarn Hall, a little jealousy had been roused within her by Mrs. Fletcher's complacent maternal pride in Mabel; and she had wished to see her own child shine, and to claim admiration

for her. As a wife she was a failure—she could never prank herself in her departed husband's devotion or in her grief for him; any allusions to him as "poor dear Alfred" were impossible. But as a stepmother she had really material enough to make a very fair show with. Gay was not equal to Mabel, she knew—family prejudice made her assume unhesitatingly that a Rushton was inferior to a Fletcher—but still she was a girl that had many good points, and of whom any one might be proud.

It was unlucky that her chief merits were of a nature that made them unfit for publication in this corner of the world. It would not rouse the admiration Sophy desired in the neighbourhood to learn how for five years Gay had maintained her stepmother and herself by singing in

public; how she had lived on the plainest and scantiest fare that Sophy might have better food; how her courage had kept up her weak charge; and how bright and merry she had been so long as they had hope of better days before them. Such merits were uncoined gold; they could not pass as legal tender to pay for the regard of society. But she had attractions that would be accepted in return for that commodity. She was good looking when she was properly dressed; she could be delightful company; and Sophy longed to see these gifts duly displayed.

She found Gay fastening her gown, and her heart sank low at sight of her.

"Oh, Gay, how pale you are!" she said complainingly. "That black frock makes a perfect guy of you. Have you any rouge here? Suppose you put some on?"

"My dear Sophy, what *would* be said of me if I did?" represented Gay. "It doesn't matter if I am pale."

"It matters to me. I want you to look nice. I don't want people to think you are a plain nobody."

Gay smiled at this *naïve* description of the effect she produced.

"Never mind, dear," she said soothingly. "Your old friends will think it more becoming for me to be a plain nobody; they will be quite pleased to see that I am so insignificant."

"Well, at least you must wear some flowers to give you a touch of colour. I have brought you these scarlet geraniums. Scarlet suits you. Now, Gay, you *shall* wear them."

Gay made no objection, and the flowers were fastened in her bodice. But Sophy

sighed to see that she looked very little better for them; her pale cheeks and languid eyes were not to be brightened in that way.

"Well, come down," said Sophy, resignedly. "Your hair is very nice. You have very pretty hair, Gay. Come," as Gay lingered, buttoning a glove, "you aren't shy, surely? You can't be afraid to see a handful of people after going before a whole theatre-full night after night?"

"Ah, that was quite another thing," returned Gay, laughing nervously. "It wasn't I myself that sang in the theatre."

Sophy opened her eyes their widest for a moment at this dark saying; the dual consciousness which all with any share of the artistic temperament possess was utterly beyond her comprehension. But she often heard Gay say puzzling

things, and there was no time to demand an explanation; Adelaide would not like it if they were late in the drawing-room, so she drew her stepdaughter on.

Several of the party had arrived already, and as Gay followed Sophy in, she felt that it was much harder to present herself before these people than it had been to go on to the stage to sing. She was not shy as a rule, but she hated to go where she would be at a disadvantage, and her pride smarted to feel that she would be regarded coldly and suspiciously, and considered an inferior.

She was sent in to dinner with a young man named Druce. His father had settled in the neighbourhood a few years ago, and as he had been in trade he had been looked on coldly at first by the best people, who cherished old-fashioned preju-

dices. If Mr. Druce had been very rich, prejudice would no doubt have been disarmed at once; but as he had only gained a comfortable fortune, caste feeling could show itself. It was only by degrees that the Druces were discovered to be worthy of social acknowledgment. They were naturally rather jealous of their standing, and Mr. Druce the younger was disposed to resent being assigned to a poor *protégée* of Mrs. Fletcher's.

His wounded dignity made him disinclined to exert himself for Miss Rushton's benefit, and talk languished. In vain did she cudgel her brain to keep it up; he only answered her remarks briefly, and let the subject drop; and he did not seem to think it part of his duty to originate anything himself. Presently an awful prospect began to open before her—that

she would have to sit silent through the greater part of dinner. In itself, that would have been pleasant enough for her; she would prefer her own meditations to this toil at small-talk. But Sophy would be vexed if she made such a poor figure, and Gay, who understood perfectly all her stepmother's anxieties about her, would like to give her as much satisfaction as could be given by a person so fundamentally unsatisfactory as a Rushton.

She turned to her neighbour to try again, and found that he was talking to the lady on his other hand, and appeared very well entertained. Gay amused herself by observing the company. Sophy was getting on well, talking and smiling with animation, and looking young and pretty in her grey gown, as if disaster

had never come near her. With her smooth skin, the colour which country air had brought to her cheeks, and her bright eyes, she might have passed for twenty-five. Mabel, in a soft white frock, with pearl ornaments, looked sweet and fresh as a May morning. Gay regarded her admiringly and a little enviously. Why was she so different from that girl? Why had life been so easy to one, so hard to the other? Thornburgh sat at the foot of the table; he always acted as host when he was at a dinner-party at Tarn Hall. He was doing his duty manfully, talking to the ladies beside him.

Gay's contemplation was interrupted by a remark from her other neighbour, and after that she had not to complain of being neglected. Mr. Saville was

fond of talking, and few or none of his neighbours were fond of hearing him talk, so a new listener was gratefully hailed by him. Miss Rushton was an admirable listener; she showed an interest in the tales of his adventures in salmon-fishing, which proved her to be a highly discriminating young woman. She had another merit—her voice was so clear and distinct that Mr. Saville, who was getting a little deaf, but would not admit even in his fears that Time was dealing so cruelly with him, could hear her easily.

Gay had conquered one admirer when the ladies left the dining-room.

"An uncommonly nice girl that Miss Rushton," observed Mr. Saville to Thornburgh. "Quite a pleasure to talk to her—she is so intelligent. I like a girl to have something to say for herself."

Later in the evening there was music. Two or three songs had been sung, among them one by Mabel, who sang correctly but without a trace of feeling, when Sophy came up to Gay, who was sitting alone.

"Adelaide wants you to sing," she said.

"Oh, I can't," returned Gay, starting and colouring.

"Oh yes, dear, you can; your voice is strong enough for a room. Do try—to please me," urged Sophy. "I want you to show them that you can do something."

Gay hesitated.

"If you would rather not, Miss Rushton," said Thornburgh, who had followed to support Sophy's request, "we will not ask you. Perhaps you don't feel equal to it."

"I will try," said Gay, rising.

"That's right, dear; I am so glad you will," said Sophy, gratefully.

Thornburgh offered his arm to take Gay to the piano.

"You will play my accompaniment, Sophy, please?" she said.

Sophy seated herself in happy anticipation. She was quite sure that Gay's singing was *hors concours* there; at its worst it was much better than what they had heard that evening.

"What will you sing?" she asked. "'Auld Robin Gray?' Do sing that."

Gay nodded in acquiescence, and Sophy began. A silence fell on the party, and all eyes were turned on the girl beside the piano. She stood with bent head, looking very pale as the first chords were struck; then she raised her head, took a long breath, and began the song. For a few

bars her notes were tremulous and uncertain. Sophy frowned impatiently. *This* was not what she had expected. Thornburgh was tempted to interfere and insist that Miss Rushton should not over-exert herself. Then there came a change, and she sang clearly and sweetly.

Her audience listened in surprise; they were as little prepared to hear such a good voice as they were for the dramatic expression which she threw into the pathetic ballad. There was an outburst of thanks and compliments at the end, and most eloquent in thanks and praise was Mr. Mildmay. He was very fond of music, and had few opportunities of gratifying his taste.

Sophy tried to take the applause with dignified coolness.

"Yes, Gay has a nice voice," she said,

"and she has had very good teaching. Her father was very musical, and he took care to give her the best masters."

This was quite true. Mr. Rushton had, with the unerring instinct of his kind, discerned how profitable Gay's voice might be to him, and, with a natural desire to secure as comfortable an old age as might be, had taken care that she should be well taught. Sophy rejoiced to recall his paternal solicitude; it caused him to make quite a respectable appearance in her talk. It was not necessary to add that, when his lamented departure took place, Mr. Rushton had been in debt to more than one singing-master. Gay had managed to pay those old scores out of her earnings.

Gay seemed gratified by her little success. She flushed and smiled, her eyes shone; she was a different being from

the pale, dejected girl she had been so far. Another song was begged for, and she chose an Italian one, with lively words and a bright air, and sang it charmingly, bringing out the sentiment so well that even the people that did not understand Italian were amused.

After that she moved away from the piano, and Mrs. Saville was called upon to sing. Most of the assembly listened with perfect complacency to the performance that followed. It was not so good as Miss Rushton's singing—that they accepted as a matter of faith on the testimony of the few instructed there—but they were used to it and they liked it well. Mrs. Saville entertained a good deal, and was a popular person.

Thornburgh happened to be one of the few that knew what good music was.

Mrs. Saville's thin voice and bad style would be too sharp a contrast to what he had been hearing, and before she began he withdrew into the conservatory, into which the drawing-room opened. Gay's voice was still in his ears, and he was thinking of her. He took, as Sophy had said, quite an interest in her, but this interest was not precisely of the kind that his cousin imagined. It was not that of pure benevolence. At first that had been his feeling towards her; he had intended to show her kindness and help to pay the debt which Sophy's people owed her. But the girl had not accepted his disinterested attentions graciously. Even after the Fletchers had won her liking and confidence, it had appeared that her animosity against Sophy's people still existed, and was concentrated on Thornburgh's head.

Passively she refused to make friends with him. She was stiff in her manner, and his attempts to draw her into talk always came to nothing. This hostility puzzled him and piqued him a little. It was so purely perverse, for he had certainly done nothing to deserve it, that it sometimes roused in him a desire to subdue it. He would like to conquer this caprice, and "tame her," as he had put it.

He opened the outer door of the conservatory, and stood on the threshold, drawing long breaths of the cool evening air. It was infinitely refreshing after the heat of the drawing-room.

Presently a slight dark figure came round the corner of the house—Gay Rushton—walking with a light springing step. She paused at a little distance from the conservatory door, and executed a few

steps of a dance, softly humming a wildly merry air and clapping her hands. This performance was clearly not for a spectator's benefit, and Thornburgh, whom it amazed, would have discreetly retired; but just before he turned, something drew Gay's eyes towards him. For a moment she paused, as if meditating flight; then she came up to him, flushed and frowning, but with a smile still in her eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Thornburgh, I didn't know anybody was there! I should not have indulged in a *pas seul* if I had seen you. You must think me a little crazy, but you needn't be alarmed—

'My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,'

I assure you; only I am so wild with joy I was obliged to do something to

express my feelings. You will think me ridiculous——"

"Indeed, I do not," he interposed. "I am very glad."

"But," she went on, "I don't care. It isn't often that one can dance for joy. My voice is coming back; I shall be able to sing again. Oh, I am so glad, so glad! When I sang to-night, it was easier than it has been for months; it didn't hurt my throat at all, and the notes came quite clearly. Oh, I am sure that I shall get my voice back in time! I was afraid that it was quite spoilt, and that I should never be able to sing again; but now"—she clasped her hands with a radiant smile—"I feel that I have a right to live. I can *breathe* now."

"I am very glad you are so much better," said Thornburgh, heartily. "I

hope you will not be in a hurry to strain your voice before it is quite strong again."

"Oh no, I will be careful, very careful. I don't mind resting now; I would do anything to get my voice back," she said brightly. "I am afraid I appeared very disobliging to-night"—with a deprecating look—"but I was quite afraid to sing when I was asked. I have not sung a note lately, for I hated to hear such weak shaky tones, and I was afraid it might be worse than it used to be. I must go back now; Sophy will miss me, and wonder where I am. No, thanks," as Thornburgh stood aside for her to pass; "I will go back through the window I escaped by. Nobody will notice me then."

On Gay's return, Mr. Mildmay's sister, who kept his house, came up to her and

entered into talk. Miss Mildmay was about ten years younger than her brother; a woman a little above the middle height, with a sallow complexion, dark hair, and a decidedly plain face. Gay had thought her so far a very unattractive person; with her sleepy air and half-shut eyes, she had presented a heavy appearance, but she could make herself agreeable when she chose, and she chose to be agreeable now.

"I was glad to see you take some notice of poor little Miss Rushton," Mr. Mildmay observed to his sister as they were being driven homeward. "It was kind of you, Lucy, to be pleasant to her."

"I wasn't prompted by kindness. I wished to know something of her; she interested me when she was singing."

"Yes, indeed, she sings uncommonly well; it was quite a treat to hear her."

"Yes, her singing is good; but it was the girl herself that interested me. I thought at first she was dull and stupid, behaving herself primly and stiffly because she was afraid of betraying the vulgar ways she has been used to——"

"Really, Lucy, you forget that Sophy Fletcher brought her up!"—in a tone of some indignation.

"I always understood that her father was not a gentleman," returned Miss Mildmay, calmly; "and naturally the girl will take after her own family. But there has been some mistake about the Rushtons; she is quite presentable. And she isn't dull at all; she lit up when she was singing, and looked charming. She has a most expressive face. I like her

very much. I asked her to come to tea to-morrow, and she said she would."

"That's right," said Mr. Mildmay, approvingly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MILDMAYS.

"'Twas a green and easy world,
As she took it."

MRS. BROWNING.

GAY'S visit to Miss Mildmay next day seemed to be for Sophy an occasion of almost as much fuss as she had made on account of the dinner-party. She came to Gay's room when she was dressing, and watched over her toilet with nervous anxiety.

"Be careful what you talk about, dear," she said imploringly. "Don't let Lucy Mildmay get anything out of you about

—about old times. That is—you know what I mean."

"Oh yes, I know quite well. I will be careful, Sophy. You needn't be afraid. I am not proud of old times, and I shall not feel inclined to boast of our troubles," returned Gay.

"I would rather the Mildmays didn't know of them," murmured Sophy, reddening faintly. "And there is no reason why they should."

"Not the least reason! They shall not hear any details from me."

Westby Lodge, Mr. Mildmay's house, was about three miles by road from Tarn Hall; but there was a shorter way across the moorland, which Gay took under the guidance of the schoolroom party. She was shown into a long drawing-room, which looked on a lawn bordered by a

plantation of firs. Here Miss Mildmay received her, and gave her a cordial welcome.

Gay soon saw that Sophy's fears had been beside the mark. Miss Mildmay was not the woman to try to draw confidences from a guest. She had too much good taste and kindness of heart to refer to mortifying facts in her interlocutor's past, even under the show of sympathy. Besides, she had not curiosity enough to dispose her to pry into the details of the Rushtons' history. It was not what had happened to Gay that interested her, but what Gay was.

She talked of indifferent subjects at first—of the weather, the surrounding country, flowers, and by degrees drifted to her own personal affairs and complained of her hard lot.

Lucy Mildmay was an unfortunate person, who had never adjusted herself to the conditions of her life, and therefore suffered from chronic discontent. She had an amount of energy in her temperament which found no outlet, and which only served to make her restless. As a poor woman she might have been happy, for then she would have been forced to work; but as a well-to-do woman, who had never had a week's steady occupation, she was consumed by *ennui.* She could not make herself believe that the duties she had to perform constituted serious work; she could not regard ordering the meals and making calls as a fair tax on her powers. She chafed at her bondage of leisure; but she was not able to break through it and find interests for herself. She was not intellectual enough to have a

resource in self-improvement. She had no taste for any art to make her an enthusiastic amateur. The poor people of the neighbourhood were already over-petted by ladies in search of employment. Miss Mildmay discovered nothing to fill up the emptiness of her days.

Gay listened with more amusement than sympathy to the laments of a woman that found her life too easy. She thought Miss Mildmay's discontent unreasonable and exaggerated. A dose of real hardship and trouble would send her back to her roseleaf couch with thankfulness for its softness. It is hard for the rich to understand the sufferings of the poor of any class; it is quite as hard for the needy to comprehend how flavourless existence can be to the well-to-do.

Presently tea was brought in, and Mr.

Mildmay entered with Thornburgh, who was his nearest neighbour—Thornburgh Hall being only a few minutes' walk from Westby Lodge. Behind the men came a little boy, clad in a white sailor suit. This was Jim, Mr. Mildmay's only child, who, according to Bridget, was thoroughly spoilt and very naughty. He was a pretty little fellow, with a fair skin, deep blue eyes fringed with long dark lashes, and golden curls, and he wore an expression of winning amiability as he held out his hand to Gay.

She thought that his aunt ought to find the care of the child a good resource against dulness. But Miss Mildmay could have assured her that it was a mere form to speak of her as having the care of her little nephew. That was the occupation of the nurse who had looked after

him since his birth, and who kept jealous guard against any encroachment on her province. Jim had been a delicate baby, and probably would not have been reared at all if it had not been for the experience and devotion of his nurse. Miss Mildmay felt it was only natural that the woman should wish to hold the chief place with her cherished charge, and did not attempt to dispute it with her.

Jim disappeared after he had greeted Gay, and returned bearing a plate piled with strawberries. He placed his little chair near his father, sat down, and asked for some cream. Mr. Mildmay was talking to Gay, and he absently passed the cream-jug to his son, who helped himself to a liberal supply, and began on the fruit with an air of placid well-being. His aunt noticed what he was doing, and exclaimed—

"James, how many strawberries have you given that child? What were you thinking of?"

"I? I gave him none. I say, Jim," as he looked at the well-filled plate, "you must not take so many; you will be ill, and you will leave none for other people, you young cormorant."

"I gathered them myself in the garden," returned Jim, with an injured air. "I haven't taken one of the tea strawberries."

"Well, that is a good thing. But what was Ross doing to let you gather them? I thought he wouldn't let you approach the strawberry-beds."

"He wasn't there," Jim explained; "he was having his tea."

Mr. Mildmay laughed, and pinched the child's ear.

"Don't eat too many, Jim," he mildly warned him.

"He has taken almost all the cream," said Miss Mildmay. "James, will you ring for some more? Jim, you should not begin with strawberries. You must have tea with nurse, if you are so greedy and troublesome."

Jim took this as a merely formal warning, and went on steadily with his strawberries.

When the elders had finished tea, Mr. Mildmay begged Miss Rushton to sing one song, and she went at once to the piano and delighted him by singing three or four. Thornburgh remained at the other end of the room with his hostess.

"How has Miss Rushton offended you?" asked Lucy, abruptly, in an interval when her brother was talking to Gay.

"Why should you suppose that she has offended me?" rejoined Thornburgh.

"Because of the way in which you listen to her singing. Either you have a grudge against her or you don't like her."

"Nonsense! I do like her, and I have no grudge against her. Your fancy runs away with you, Lucy."

"Please, a piece of cake, Cousin Miles," put in Jim. "Not that," as Thornburgh lifted a knife on the cake nearest him; "the cake with almond icing; it's the best."

"I should have expected that you wouldn't like Miss Rushton," Miss Mildmay remarked, when Jim had been satisfied.

"Pray why?"

"Oh, I always thought that your ideal

girl was a very well-trained young person, docile, and somewhat insipid."

"One can like other styles than one's ideal," rejoined Thornburgh.

But he did not feel so amiably disposed towards Gay as he professed himself to be. Her manner had vexed him that afternoon. He had supposed, after the confidential little talk about her voice, that he had gained some ground with her. But he had been wrong. She had slipped back to her old chill stiffness; he had seen her face cloud when he entered, and during tea she had not once addressed him of her own accord. She was, if anything, less gracious than she had been so far.

In truth, she had never been more reluctant to encounter him. After that talk, when her overflowing joy had found

expression, she had felt heartily ashamed of her unreserve. It had been childish, undignified, silly, to be thrown off her balance and talk in that exaggerated way to Mr. Thornburgh of all people. What did he care about her or her voice that she should pour out gushing confidences to him? The cold fit which inevitably follows on a hot fit with a person of excitable temperament is a very unpleasant experience; it was specially unpleasant to Gay, who had been schooled by circumstance into the practice of reticence and self-control.

When Jim's meal came to a tardy close, he found time to attend to less important matters, and drew near to Gay as she sang. He leant against the piano, staring at her fixedly, and presently asked if she could sing, "D'ye ken John Peel?"

Gay shook her head.

"It's a jolly song," said Jim. "William, our groom, sings it on week-days. On Sundays he sings 'Crown Him Lord of all.'"

"Miss Rushton has sung enough now; she must be tired," said Mr. Mildmay.

"Will you come into the garden?" said Jim, politely. "I'll show you my garden. I've got lots of mustard and cress in it."

Gay accepted the invitation, and he led her out.

"Can you dress dolls?" he asked abruptly; and being informed that she could, he confided to her that he wanted somebody to dress some dolls for him. He had gone to the vicarage a few days ago to play with a little niece of the vicar who was staying there; and he had then

tasted the domestic joys of playing with dolls, and longed to repeat the pleasure.

"But dolls are for girls, not for boys," said Gay.

Jim refused to acknowledge that his sex laid any disability upon him; he didn't see why boys should not do as they chose. Nurse had laughed at him, and said she couldn't be bothered to dress dolls. "But if you would," he said, with a coaxing look.

"Oh yes, I will dress as many as you like," returned Gay.

Thereupon Jim ran off, and returned with a parcel.

"There are two in it," he said, handing it over to Gay. "I got them in the village. Will you dress them like sailors?"

Then he displayed an untidy mass of

mustard and cress, which he had raised in a corner of the kitchen garden, and insisted on cutting some for Gay's tea next day.

"She's a very nice girl—Miss Rushton," said Mr. Mildmay to his sister that evening.

Miss Mildmay assented cordially.

"I hope you will have her here often, Lucy. She seems to have won Jim's heart at first sight."

"Oh yes, I mean to ask her a good deal. She is a refreshing change in this dull place. But I can't have her often alone; that would scarcely do. The Fletchers wouldn't like it."

"No, of course it wouldn't do. I should say that you had better ask Mrs. Rushton with her next time; you must not leave her out."

"Very well! I didn't like to invite her, under the circumstances."

"Oh, that's a very old story," said Mr. Mildmay, hastily. "That needn't prevent your being friendly to the poor thing now. Miss Rushton seems very fond of her," he added, after a pause; "she talked of her in the most affectionate way."

"Yes, they seem remarkably fond of each other. It is the best thing I ever knew of Sophy Fletcher."

After this Miss Mildmay frequently invited Mrs. and Miss Rushton. But, as things fell out, Gay was much oftener at Westby Lodge than her stepmother. Sophy, after making a few visits, found excuses for not accepting Miss Mildmay's invitations. She appeared to shrink from the intimacy which that lady endeavoured to bring about; and, remembering the

past, Lucy could not wonder that this was her state of mind.

When Sophy was a girl of twenty, Mr. Mildmay had fallen in love with her; and, though his suit had never been formally accepted, Miss Fletcher had not frowned on it. She had played with him and put him off. Her father had said she was full young to think of the responsibilities of marriage, and begged that Mr. Mildmay would give her time to make up her mind; and Mr. Mildmay had waited. Sophy went away on a visit to an old school friend, and there, her evil star being in the ascendant, she met Mr. Rushton, an unsuccessful medical man. The courtship was of the briefest. Sophy succumbed at once to the charm of a dark, handsome face and a masterful manner, and Mr. Mildmay was forgotten.

It must be embarrassing to the heroine of such a story to see much of the man that she had thrown over. Lucy did not press the attentions which Sophy declined; she had no desire for Mrs. Rushton's company, and infinitely preferred to have Gay alone. Gay improved on further acquaintance; the subdued, melancholy air which she had worn on her first coming to the neighbourhood often disappeared now, and she would be bright and lively, fluent in talk, and ready in laughter. Miss Mildmay found her very amusing, and was delighted with her.

Gay, on her part, liked Miss Mildmay, and enjoyed her society. Her spirits were recovering from the depression which anxiety and privation had caused. Fresh air, early hours, rest, and good food had made her health better than it had been

for years. The discovery that her voice was returning had given her hope for the future, and her heart was very light. She had not known such ease of mind since the day when Sophy had come rushing with hysterical sobs and cries to tell her that her father had left them; and in the respite from black care she felt sometimes childishly gay.

She knew instinctively that she would find neither comprehension nor sympathy for such moods at Tarn Hall. The Fletchers were very kind, very amiable, but they were serious and matter-of-fact. It was necessary to weigh one's words when talking with them. They could not understand a playful exaggeration, and they had a very limited perception of a joke. Besides, Mrs. Fletcher would have felt it decidedly unbecoming for a person

in Gay's position to be very lively. Moderate cheerfulness was the proper thing for her.

But, with Miss Mildmay, Gay need not restrain her fits of light-heartedness. That lady had no artistic scruples as to the demeanour suitable to the penniless orphan of a good-for-nothing. Her ideal of hereditary obligation was not high, and she encouraged Gay in what Mrs. Fletcher would have considered frivolous levity.

Gay found increasing favour in Jim's eyes, too, and he calmly laid claim to her as a playfellow, and demanded her assistance in his amusements. She had to make sails and rig his boats, and her needle was often employed for the fair herd of dolls which he quickly got together. He had a dramatic instinct, which he indulged by making those dolls run an

eventful and adventurous career; and his art was highly realistic. When the catastrophe required that the actors' clothes should be torn (and it usually did) he would not allow this to be done in mere show, but zealously made rents so big that new costumes were needed, which Gay had to supply.

CHAPTER VIII.

"IF!"

"But few that court Retirement are aware
Of half the toils they must encounter there."
COWPER.

GAY was so much at Westby Lodge that presently the attention of the neighbourhood was attracted, and the gossips began to discuss the possibilities of the situation. Mrs. Steele, happening to find Mrs. Fletcher alone one day when she called, hinted at the subject which was exercising the minds of Mr. Mildmay's friends.

Mrs. Fletcher opened her eyes in amazement.

"The idea is absurd!" she said decidedly. "Mr. Mildmay would never think of such a thing; it would be most unsuitable in every way. She is too young for him."

"That is what I said when it was mentioned to me," returned Mrs. Steele. "Mr. Mildmay has far too much sense to marry a girl young enough to be his daughter."

The disparity in age was not so very great, but it was ranged in the forefront of objections by both ladies. Considering the Rushtons' connection with Mrs. Fletcher, they could not very well say that the young lady's family was quite beneath Mr. Mildmay's pretensions.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Fletcher; "oh, there can be nothing in it. Miss Mildmay is kind to Miss Rushton, and often has her

at the house—that is all. It is very strange that people talk so."

"Oh, people always talk, and I do think this is one of the worst places in England for gossip," said Mrs. Steele, with the virtuous air of one that has neither part nor lot in such things. "As a rule, I pay no attention to what I hear. But I thought I would just ask you if you had reason to suppose there was any foundation for the talk; for one knows that men do make foolish marriages, and when they are getting on in life they often prefer somebody much younger than themselves. And I noticed at Mrs. Saville's garden-party yesterday that Mr. Mildmay was very attentive to Miss Rushton, and he seems to think so much of her singing, so I began to wonder *if*, after all——"

"Oh no, nothing of the kind! At

least, I have never dreamt of such a thing."

"Well, I am glad to hear you say there is nothing in it, for I should be sorry to see Mr. Mildmay make such a match. Then," with a change of tone, "we are to start at half-past ten to-morrow, dear Mrs. Fletcher? I hope Mabel will have fine weather; it looks quite settled at present."

The next day was Mabel's birthday, and it was to be celebrated by a picnic.

Mrs. Steele departed, and Mrs. Fletcher meditated on what she had heard, and felt as much disturbed as she could be by any matter that did not directly affect her or one of her children. She had professed incredulity, and had honestly felt it at first —the idea of Mr. Mildmay's marrying Gay struck her as preposterous—but on

second thoughts she did not feel so comfortably secure.

After all, that a marriage was unsuitable was no argument that it would not take place; and Mrs. Steele had suggested one or two plausible grounds for believing that this might come to pass. Mr. Mildmay had certainly taken a good deal of notice of Gay lately; he was an enthusiastic admirer of her singing; and she was very often asked to Westby Lodge. Mr. Mildmay's good angel might not intervene to prevent him from falling into this folly.

Mrs. Fletcher sighed to herself, and thought that poor Sophy was indeed an unlucky woman. To see her stepdaughter secure the comfortable home and good position which might have been hers! Fate was determined to castigate her sharply for her girlhood's error.

Mrs. Fletcher was still pondering these things when Thornburgh came in, and she presently informed him of the subject of her thoughts. The only good that she gained by this confidence was the relief of expression. Thornburgh did not soothe her by sympathy. He refused to look at the matter from her point of view. He said it would be a very good thing for Miss Rushton if Mr. Mildmay chose her, which remark struck Mrs. Fletcher as a trivial irrelevance. He would not see that it was such an unsuitable match for Mr. Mildmay.

"She is a good deal younger than he is, but if she doesn't mind that, nobody else need care; and as to family, she is a gentlewoman, which is the essential point."

"But her father——"

"Well, the father is not a recommendation of the match; but, luckily, he is

dead, and won't trouble the daughter's husband."

"It will seem so peculiarly hard on Sophy if Mr. Mildmay should take a fancy to this girl," said Mrs. Fletcher, sadly.

"Sophy had her chance years ago, and threw it away; she can't expect Mildmay to return to her."

"If it had been any one else, it wouldn't have mattered. But to have her own stepdaughter in the place that she must feel she ought to have taken; it will be mortifying, Miles! It seems as if there was no end to the unfortunate consequences of her great mistake. If she had only not married as she did——"

"If she had married as she ought, she would have been Mildmay's wife now, and Miss Rushton would never have come to this neighbourhood," observed Thorn-

burgh, with a laugh. "That is certain. A pity that Sophy was not wise enough to foresee what complications she was preparing for her future."

"I am sorry that we asked Miss Rushton here," said Mrs. Fletcher, with unmoved gravity. She saw nothing absurd in her own lamentations, and was not offended by Thornburgh's amusement. She was accustomed to see him appear diverted by things in which she saw nothing ludicrous. "It is a great pity—as things have turned out—that she ever came to our house."

"Well, I don't see how you could have done otherwise. You could not neglect a girl to whom Sophy was so much indebted."

"No," acknowledged Mrs. Fletcher, "it was impossible to avoid inviting her. We

could not help ourselves. But still I am sorry—I am *very* sorry for Sophy. You didn't seem surprised when I told you, Miles. Have you heard any talk about it before?"

"Oh yes. I have heard some conjectures on the subject."

"Do you think Mr. Mildmay really has serious intentions?"

"I am not an authority on such delicate matters," he returned carelessly.

"She is very often at Westby Lodge," said Mrs. Fletcher. "Lucy is always asking her. She is there this afternoon. And certainly she has been different lately. She has lost the grave, subdued look she had when she came here, and has quite a bright, cheerful expression."

"Really? I haven't noticed her looks," said Thornburgh, in an indifferent tone.

Sophy and Mabel came in at this point, and the subject was changed. Over the teacups less exciting topics were discussed: the weather, the drive from which Sophy and her niece had just returned, the arrangements for the picnic.

They had not finished tea, when Gay entered the room.

"How early you are!" exclaimed Mabel. "Have you had tea?"

"Yes, thank you. We had it early because some people called who live a long way off. I came away directly after tea, because Mr. Mildmay was driving in this direction, and he kindly offered to bring me."

She sat down, and Thornburgh looked at her with more attention than he had bestowed on her lately. As he said, he had not noticed her looks. His interest

in her had been checked by her want of response to his well-meant attempts to be friendly. He did not care to persevere in advances which were never graciously met; and he left her alone, as it was plain that that was the treatment she preferred from him.

Mrs. Fletcher's remarks this afternoon had bored him: he was tired of Gay Rushton. But the talk had brought her out of the background of his mind into which she had fallen, and he scanned her now with some curiosity. She had certainly improved very much in appearance since she left London. Her face was no longer thin and worn; the harassed lines were smoothed away from the brow and lips, and there was a delicate bloom on the cheeks. She smiled as she talked, and her eyes had a vivacious light in them.

For the first time he thought her decidedly pretty.

She held a large bunch of hothouse flowers in her hand.

"Mr. Mildmay gave me these," she said. "Aren't they lovely? Will you have them in the drawing-room or for the dinner-table, Mabel? You always arrange the flowers."

"I should like them for the dinner-table," said Mabel. And she carried them off at once.

"Miss Mildmay is going to the seaside with Jim next week," Gay went on, "and she has asked me to go with them and stay as long as they stay."

The tidings which Gay had communicated with eager pleasure roused consternation in Mrs. Fletcher. This invitation seemed a proof that "there was something

in it." It seemed to affect Sophy disagreeably also. Seeing her downcast face, Mrs. Fletcher wondered whether she had any suspicion of the state of things.

"Where is Lucy going?" asked Mrs. Fletcher.

"To Colwyn Bay."

"That is a very pretty place."

"Very," added Thornburgh. "I hope you will have fine weather, Miss Rushton."

Gay did not answer. She was looking at Sophy with wistful perplexity. Sophy was apparently engrossed in matching a piece of silk which she held in her hand, comparing it with one skein after another. It was a futile expedient *pour se donner une contenance.* She could not control herself sufficiently to perform even such a simple manœuvre well, and she diligently

laid her strand of peacock-blue beside green, orange, and purple, quite unconscious of what she was doing.

"Which day are you going?" asked Thornburgh.

"I don't know whether I shall go," returned Gay. "I did not accept Miss Mildmay's invitation before I knew what Sophy would wish."

"Oh, you must do as you like, dear," said Sophy, hurriedly. "It would be very nice for you, and you would enjoy it. Don't think of *me*. I should never wish to prevent your having any pleasure."

"No, certainly not," said Mrs. Fletcher. "Of course you will go, Gay; the change will do you good."

Then she turned to Thornburgh, and began talking about some difficulty in the management of the stable. What did

Miles think about it? Would he mind giving the coachman some advice? They discussed this diligently, and Gay sat silent, looking as subdued as she had done in the earliest days of her stay at Tarn Hall.

Presently Thornburgh went out to speak to the coachman. He had performed this mission, and was returning by way of the garden, when Gay met him.

"Can you spare me three minutes, Mr. Thornburgh? I want to ask you a question."

He intimated that he would be delighted to answer any question she might choose to put.

"Will you please tell me why Mrs. Fletcher and Sophy dislike my going with Miss Mildmay?" said Gay, fixing grave keen eyes upon him.

This question he certainly could not answer "with the frankness that befits."

"Oh, they don't dislike it," he affirmed.

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"They do. You saw them just now as well as I, and you must have noticed that they were not pleased. I don't understand it. Will you tell me if there is any reason why I shouldn't go?"

"No, there is none at all. I am sure they would wish you to have the pleasure."

"It won't be a pleasure if it vexes Sophy," she said wistfully. "I thought she would be pleased, but—— Well, of course, I must give up the idea. I hoped you would explain why she objects. Is there any coolness between her and the Mildmays?"

"Well," acknowledged Thornburgh, "there is something of the kind. But

there is nothing that need prevent your being as friendly as you choose with them. It is silly of Sophy to remember old times now."

"I don't think you should speak of her in that way to me," said Gay, loftily.

"I beg your pardon," he returned meekly.

He looked after her, as she went towards the house, and laughed to himself, half amused by her dignified rebuke, half touched by her passionate loyalty to his cousin.

"Sophy's nonsense will break off the affair," he thought. "This girl is quite capable of making common cause with her, and snubbing the Mildmays because she thinks Sophy doesn't like them. Little goose! she ought to understand her own interest better. She must be

very innocent if she has no suspicion that Mildmay's liking may be serious. To be sure, working for bread doesn't make a girl so knowing in such matters as husband-hunting does. But, really, it will be too bad if Sophy's jealousy and out-of-date sentiment interfere!"

He felt such disgust at this possibility, that when he found Sophy alone in the drawing-room, he took advantage of the opportunity to suggest that she would do well to encourage Gay's going to the seaside. He touched as lightly as he could on the subject; but his hint was not taken in good part. Sophy burst into tears, and sobbed out that it was very strange he should think she didn't wish Gay to go. She *did* wish it. She was glad that Gay should have the change. Nobody loved Gay half so well as she

did, and it was cruel of her cousin to accuse her of being selfish enough to object to anything that would do dear Gay any good.

In short, Sophy poured out in that flood of tears all the nervous excitement she had suffered during the last few days since she had begun to say to herself that pregnant "if" which had roused the curiosity of Mr. Mildmay's circle. "*If* there is anything in it." Weak as she was, she had pride enough to struggle to restrain her agitation on that account. She would never have wept for that cause before any one; but Thornburgh had given her a decent occasion for emotion, and she profited by it. He looked on with a natural masculine contempt and a sense of injury. He had said nothing that could justify such an outburst, for he

did not divine that his words had little enough to do with it.

The door opened, and Gay entered, followed by Bridget.

"Oh, Gay!" cried Sophy, with a fresh burst of weeping; "indeed, indeed, I wish you to go. Miles is quite wrong. He thinks I am selfish; but you know better, don't you?"

"I wish Mr. Thornburgh wouldn't interfere between us," said Gay, sharply and clearly, putting her arms round Sophy with a fine gesture of protection, and flashing a fiery glance at Thornburgh.

"Oh, of course I am wrong," said he, with a provoked laugh.

Bridget stood with wide eyes, amazed to hear anybody speak tartly to that authority, Cousin Miles, and more amazed at the way in which he took it. Bridget

would have expected him to frown with stern displeasure, and crush the audacious person who forgot the respect due to him; and he only laughed.

But Sophy took up the cudgels for him.

"You needn't be rude to Miles, Gay," she said peevishly, releasing herself. "He has a perfect right to give me advice if he likes; only he has made a mistake."

She beat a hasty retreat, and after a minute's pause Gay went away. Sophy betook herself to her own room, and there she indulged in self-pity and occasional tears till the dressing-bell rang. She was in very low spirits, though she was far from entertaining the feelings with which Mrs. Fletcher and Thornburgh credited her. She was too shallow to be stirred to the bitter mortification and regret which

Mrs. Fletcher attributed to her; too sweet-natured and easy-going to feel the jealousy of which Thornburgh suspected her. She was incapable of serious and tragic emotions.

But she was quite as incapable of rising to a large and generous view of the situation, and since it had occurred to her that Mr. Mildmay was attracted by Gay, she had felt a pettish resentment against Fate for bringing about just this combination. It made her feel so old and laid on the shelf to see the man who had been her lover turn to a younger woman; and it was hard that Gay should marry in a way that would do her (Sophy) no good at all. If Gay had found any other husband, Sophy would have been delighted, knowing that she would give her stepmother as large a share as possible of her good fortune.

But when she was Mrs. Mildmay, Sophy could not make her home for part of the year with her.

Sophy felt that life would be a very dull thing henceforth. She could expect nothing but a continuance of her stay at Tarn Hall, and she was already weary of that, so weary that, before Mr. Mildmay became a factor in her speculations, she had occasionally found herself thinking that if Gay's voice became quite strong, and she got a good engagement, it would be pleasant to live with her again.

Sophy had enjoyed intensely at first the comfort, ease, and plenty of her sister-in-law's house, and had been warmly grateful for them; but presently she found that these good things were not to be enjoyed without any return on her part.

She was a dependent, and she must please her benefactor.

Mrs. Fletcher was a very good woman, and had a weakness which many good people possess. She believed firmly in her power of doing good and ability to exercise a salutary influence. When Sophy and Gay came to her house she felt that a grand opportunity of improving her fellows was granted her. Sophy was a sort of prodigal, who had been subjected to evil influences, and had no doubt deteriorated under them; Gay had been brought up in a deplorable familiarity with lax, disreputable doings. Under Mrs. Fletcher's roof they should both be reformed, and learn a more excellent way.

To Sophy her sister-in-law's yoke proved heavy. She disliked regularity, and she hated being usefully employed.

It was hard work, after the late hours to which Gay's theatrical life had accustomed her, to rise in time for an eight o'clock breakfast; it bored her to spend morning after morning in making garments for the poor; it bored her to go out at twelve for a walk and to be taken after luncheon for a drive; and it bored her most of all to pass the evening in doing embroidery, while Mrs. Fletcher and Mabel read aloud by turns some improving book. The consciousness that she was altogether a failure and must go delicately, and her sister-in-law's complacency in her own prosperity, which she betrayed constantly without the least suspicion that it was painful to Sophy, would have given a bitter flavour to a much pleasanter life; they made this round a hundredfold more distasteful. To be with Gay in London,

free to do as she pleased, became very attractive, and Sophy's heart sank within her as her one way of escape seemed about to close up.

CHAPTER IX.

JIM DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF.

"I may sit in a corner, and cry, heigh-ho."
Much Ado about Nothing.

THE scene of the picnic next day was a glen high among the hills, ten miles off. The day was brilliantly fine; the sunshine was almost too bright for pleasure on the drive from Tarn Hall; but the younger portion of the party were in too good spirits to care for the glare and heat, and comforted the elders, who complained, by assurances that they would

find coolness and shade in the glen. The journey was performed in a break hired from the village; Mrs. Fletcher was kept in too good order by her coachman to give her own horses such a day's work. Mr. and Mrs. Steele went with the Fletchers; the other guests were to go separately.

When the Tarn Hall party arrived at their destination, Mr. Mildmay and Thornburgh came forward to help the ladies out; and Jim greeted Mabel with birthday congratulations and offered her a gift. This little ceremony he went through creditably, but when Mabel, charmed with the pretty bracelet she had received, would have kissed the ostensible donor, Jim's manners broke down.

"Don't like kissing," he said firmly, retreating with both hands behind him.

"You should be very proud that Mabel is willing to kiss you, sir," said his father, laughing.

"Oh, Jim, you like it sometimes," said Mrs. Steele, reproachfully.

Jim shook his head and glared forbiddingly at the lady, who always teased him by her caresses.

"Won't you kiss me?" she went on.

"No, I won't kiss anybody," Jim proclaimed. "I'm going to the beck. Come, Bridget."

He trotted away, and Bridget obediently followed; she was very submissive to the young despot's will when they were together.

"He is very naughty this morning," remarked his aunt. "He has been cross ever since he got up. You must not mind him, Mabel; when he is in what nurse

calls his 'contrary humours,' he is very tiresome."

"Oh, my dear, he can't be well," cried Mrs. Steele. "Poor little fellow, perhaps he is sickening for measles; there are a good many cases in the village."

"He is perfectly well," said Miss Mildmay, placidly. "These fits of wilfulness are too common to make one anxious for his health."

A place where they could eat luncheon was found on the banks of the stream which flowed through the glen, and there was a good deal of fuss while hampers were unpacked and the provisions were arranged.

While this was going on, Gay strolled after Bridget and Jim, who had disappeared. She found them a little further down the beck, apparently not on good

terms. Bridget, holding the skirt of her frock gathered up before her, had set her back against a rock and was eyeing Jim with a resolute expression, as who should say—

> "This rock shall fly
> From its firm base as soon as I——"

Jim was stamping, with clenched fists.

"I won't," said Bridget.

"You shall," retorted Jim. "I'll make you—you're only a girl."

"I'm bigger and stronger than you, anyway, and you shan't make me," said Bridget.

Jim made a rush at his opponent, goaded by this defiance, but he was caught and held back.

"What is the matter?" asked Gay.

"Oh, Gay, he wants to tie prickly things to the tail of this poor little kitten,"

said Bridget, giving a glimpse of a ball of black fur in her skirt, "and I wouldn't let him. Isn't he cruel?"

"You horrid boy!" cried Gay, tightening her grasp on the little hands, which were struggling to be free. "How can you hurt a dumb animal and strike a little girl? Jim, you aren't behaving like a gentleman."

"She could have struck back," growled Jim. "She said she was stronger than me."

"You know very well that Bridget would not strike you. Let the kitten go, Bridget. There," as the little creature rushed away, "it is safe. Now come to luncheon, children."

"Have you been in any mischief, Jim?" asked Mr. Mildmay, jestingly, as his son and heir approached. "Has he, Bridget?"

he said in a graver tone, noting the scowl on Jim's brow.

"Oh no!" answered Bridget. "He hasn't done anything naughty. Gay stopped him."

"Ah, Miss Rushton manages him better than anybody," said Mr. Mildmay, with a smile at Gay.

At this speech there was a slight flutter among the matrons.

"It was so very marked; really," Mrs. Steele observed afterwards, "it was almost as good as an offer," and the vicar's wife began to regard Gay as a person to whom it was worth while to pay attention. She had always been kind to the girl, but there is an immense difference between the kindness suitable to a social inferior, and the cordial civilities which are due to "people of importance."

After luncheon had been disposed of, and the men had indulged in the further refreshment of tobacco, the party "explored," to use the expression made dear by Mrs. Elton. They walked up the glen to view the waterfall, which was the chief picturesque feature of the place.

Sophy, who had been very silent during the meal, attached herself to Mrs. Steele, and tried to talk of parish matters. This was to be her fate, clearly, prosing about the poor and doing plain sewing; there was no hope of freedom, independence, and late breakfasts for her, and she must resign herself to good works and making herself agreeable to her sister-in-law's guests.

"I might as well be an old maid," groaned poor Sophy in her heart, as she tried to do what Mrs. Fletcher would consider her duty.

But Mrs. Steele was not desirous of Mrs. Rushton's society. She wished to talk with Miss Mildmay, partly because Miss Mildmay was better worth cultivating, partly because she wanted to try to discover what that lady thought about her brother's intentions. She smiled sweetly upon Mrs. Rushton, and chatted pleasantly about the sewing society, and at the first decent opportunity she dropped behind and joined Miss Mildmay, who was sauntering along alone.

The vicar was in attendance on Mrs. Fletcher, a good way in the rear; Mabel, helped by Thornburgh, was climbing to a point whence a good view of the waterfall was to be had; none of the rest of the party were in sight, and Sophy strayed off by herself. Close to the edge of the beck she came upon Mr. Mildmay and

Gay, seated and engaged in earnest talk. Sophy would have retreated, but she was seen, and both sprang up, looking startled and embarrassed.

"I beg your pardon," said Sophy, wearing a confused air herself. "I—I was looking for Jim," she hastily added, saying the first thing that occurred to her.

"Jim isn't here. I think he is with Bridget," returned Gay. There was still a little embarrassment on her face, but there was an amused smile lurking about her lips. "I'll go and find him. You sit down and rest, Sophy. It is delightfully cool in the shade here."

"Oh no, thank you; I am not hot. I want to go on to the waterfall," said Sophy.

Gay slipped a hand caressingly through her arm.

"Very well, dear, we will go too."

"Certainly," said Mr. Mildmay. "It will never do not to see the waterfall."

"After all," said Sophy, when they had gone a few steps, "I don't think I care very much about seeing it. I have seen it before. Go on with Mr. Mildmay, Gay, and I will rest a little here."

Gay looked at her coaxingly.

"*Please* come, Sophy."

"No; I feel rather tired. I would rather not."

And Sophy stuck firmly to her resolve. Gay proposed that Mr. Mildmay should stay with her stepmother while she went on alone, but Sophy declined this with an acerbity very unusual in her. It was too much even for her easy temper to have another woman prompting her old admirer to offer her attentions.

Gay and Mr. Mildmay went on towards the foot of the waterfall, and soon found Jim. He was poking about in the grass, and casting wrathful glances at Bridget, who was down on her knees earnestly searching in a tuft of heather.

"Lost something?" asked Mr. Mildmay.

"She's lost my knife," replied Jim. "I lent it to her, and she went and dropped it, and we *can't* find it anywhere."

"Well, never mind," said his father. "You are not likely to find it here. I'll get you another knife, Jim. Get up, Bridget. Don't bother about it any longer."

Bridget rose promptly.

"I've looked ever such a time," she said aside to Gay; "and I'm so tired

of it. I offered to buy him another knife, but he said he wanted that one—not another."

Jim was still of the same mind. It was mockery to try to soothe the pangs of bereavement by the gift of another knife. No other could be so dear as the precious one that had been lost. But he was tired of the search for the time, so he moodily gave it up, strolled towards the beck, and began to descend the high bank to some large stones, which showed above the water.

"You must not go there, Jim; you will fall in," Gay warned him.

Jim obstinately held on his course, and was making his way over the stones, when his foot slipped and he fell forward into the water. Happily it was shallow there. He picked himself up directly, and his

father pulled him out and set him on the bank with a little shake.

"Why don't you do as you are told, sir?"

Jim was very wet, and must be put into dry clothes as quickly as possible. It was settled that he should be driven to the nearest cottage, which was a mile and a half off, and Sophy, who had come up by this time, her repose having been cut short by the fear that Mrs. Fletcher would not like it if she shirked any of the programme laid down for the day, proposed that she should go with him and attend to him. Gay begged that she might look after Jim, but Sophy put her aside and insisted on devoting herself to the child.

Mr. Mildmay was profuse in acknowledgments of the trouble she was taking.

"I am very glad to do it," returned Sophy, with perfect sincerity. She was delighted to have a good excuse for withdrawing from the company in which she had such a humble, obscure part to sustain. "It is no trouble at all; it is only going on a little earlier than the rest of you. The cottage is near the place where we are to have tea, you know, and we will join you when you come. His things will be dry then."

After the waterfall had been duly seen, the party were driven to the spot where it had been intended that they should have tea in the open air. When they reached the place the weather had changed, dark clouds were spreading over the sky, and Mrs. Fletcher decided that they had better have tea at an inn which stood near and begin the journey home without delay.

Gay went to inform Sophy of the change of plan, taking Bridget to show her the way. At the door of the cottage she was met by Sophy, who looked flushed and excited.

"Have you seen Jim?" she demanded.

"No. Isn't he here?"

"He ran off. I left him for a few minutes after he was dressed—he was playing with the children here—and when I went to look for him he was gone. I thought somebody would meet him," said Sophy, helplessly.

"We have seen nothing of him. Where can he be?"

"I know," cried Bridget. "He must have gone back for his knife."

"Oh dear, oh dear, he will lose himself! And it is going to rain," cried Sophy. "What shall I do?"

"I will go after him. He could not walk fast," said Gay. "I shall soon find him."

She hurried off, and Sophy was somewhat reassured. Her habit of leaning on Gay made her feel at ease about any difficulty which her stepdaughter took in hand.

Ten minutes later, Thornburgh, who had walked from the waterfall with Mr. Mildmay, appeared. He had been sent to hasten Sophy's arrival at the starting-place. Sophy fell into a flutter again. They could not go without Gay; would Adelaide very much mind waiting?

"Of course she will wait. Miss Rushton will turn up directly, I suppose. She knew that you were going to start earlier."

"But, Miles, I don't know how long she may be."

And Sophy told, in a style obscure enough for Oliver Cromwell, what Gay was doing. It took Thornburgh some time to make out exactly what had happened.

"You shouldn't have let her go," he said curtly.

"But, Miles——"

"I must go after her," he went on. "Up the glen, you say? Hang that child! he is always in some mischief. No, I have not seen anything of him. We came by the fell. You had better start at once. Miss Rushton can return with the Mildmays."

Thornburgh set off in pursuit in anything but a good humour. The task thrust on him was not at all to his taste. He was tired of the day, and wished to return as soon as possible to the pleasures of his peaceful bachelor home—solitude,

silence, a good dinner, and unlimited tobacco. It was provoking to defer these enjoyments to hunt up a naughty child and a girl whom he rather disliked. He would get no reward from Gay for his service. He was sure that she would receive it ungraciously, if she did not positively snub him, as she had snubbed him yesterday.

He walked fast, but Gay had a good start, and it was not till she had nearly reached the head of the glen that he overtook her.

"I followed you," he said, rather stiffly. "I was afraid that you might have some difficulty in finding Jim."

"Oh, I am so glad to see you," she returned. "I was just asking myself in horror what I *should* do if he did not turn up soon."

"It is rather hard on you to have this extra walking," said Thornburgh, somewhat mollified by this reception. "You will be very tired."

"It can't be helped. I couldn't leave poor Jim to himself."

"Poor Jim, indeed! He is exceedingly naughty. I hope he will not be invited to a picnic for the next two years."

"I hope he may soon be found. Sophy will be so distressed if any harm comes to him."

They walked on in silence, Gay a little in front, straining her eyes to discern the little figure she was in search of. Presently she uttered an exclamation of joy. Master Jim was advancing towards them, one hand thrust jauntily into his pocket. Gay seized him and kissed him.

"Oh, Jim, you dear—you naughty boy! Why did you run away?"

"I wanted to find my knife," said Jim, calmly. "I've got it."

"Well, let us make haste back now," said Thornburgh, feeling that remonstrance with the small offender was mere waste of breath. "Here, I'll carry you, Jim; we shall get on faster that way."

Jim was very tired, and more subdued by his solitary walk than he would have liked to show. He let Thornburgh lift him, and nestled down comfortably in his arms.

"It would be better to cross the beck up here by the stepping-stones," said Thornburgh; "we shall get back more quickly by the path on the other side."

Gay said nothing; but Jim remarked—

"Miss Rushton doesn't like stepping-stones. She's afraid to cross them."

"But, of course, I shall help her over," said Thornburgh. "You won't mind crossing, in that case, Miss Rushton?"

"I shall feel secure then, thank you. It is too bad of Jim to betray my weakness; but I am a dreadful coward about stepping-stones," returned Gay, smiling.

"No doubt you would feel more at home in crossing a busy London street."

"Yes, that would have no terrors for me."

Thornburgh carried Jim over the beck, and then returned for Gay. The stones were slippery with moss and spray, and she held his hand tight as she made her way cautiously from one to another. He did not release her hand when they reached the other side.

"You had better let me help you up the bank," he said. "It is very high and steep, and the trees make it so dark that it is difficult to pick your way."

Jim had climbed up alone, and his two companions followed him. Thornburgh went slowly; the darkness made that necessary, and he was glad of it. He would have liked to make the bank ten times as high, to prolong the time in which he could feel those slender fingers lying warm in his—it gave him such a strange, new sensation.

The path on this side was much more direct than on the other, and the walk back was soon accomplished. They crossed the beck again lower down, by a bridge close to the inn. At that house they found that the Mildmays had departed already.

"There must have been some mistake, and they have thought that Sophy had taken Jim with her," remarked Thornburgh. "You must let me drive you, Miss Rushton; my dog-cart will be round directly. Meanwhile, you must have some tea."

"Oh no, thank you; I would rather not wait for anything. The sooner we are off the better. Sophy will not be comfortable till she knows Jim is safe."

"A few minutes' more suspense will not make much difference, surely. I wish you would have something; you look quite tired. I don't think Sophy will be so very anxious."

"I am sure she will," persisted Gay; "and I don't want anything, thank you."

"*I* should like a piece of cake," observed Jim, "and some lemonade."

These refreshments were obtained,

under a protest from Thornburgh that Jim deserved only the bread and water of retribution; then they drove off under the first drops of a heavy downpour. Jim sat at his elders' feet, well protected by the rug, ate his cake, and enjoyed himself as much as if he had been a pattern of virtue. When he had disposed of a substantial wedge of seed-cake, he gave way to fatigue, and sank into a placid slumber, with his head resting against Gay's knee.

The rug fell back once and showed his face.

"Isn't he pretty?" said the girl, softly touching one golden curl.

Thornburgh looked at her instead of at Jim, and thought that her face was wonderfully sweet with that tender expression on it. Next moment he liked it even better,

for she met his eyes with a frank, pleasant look, without any of the guarded semi-hostility with which she usually regarded him.

"He is pretty enough," he rejoined; "but I feel disposed to make reflections on the superiority of moral worth and good behaviour to a fair outside, when Jim conducts himself as he has done to-day."

"Yes, he has been naughty," said Gay, drawing up the rug. "You must owe him a grudge for giving you that walk up the glen."

"Oh no, I did not mean that—I did not mind that at all. I was thinking of the trouble you have had."

"I don't mind it; I like Jim. And if I didn't like him, I should still have been obliged to go after him to set Sophy's mind at rest."

"You are very fond of Sophy," said Thornburgh.

"Naturally," she returned, a little drily. "Sophy is the only person in the world that really cares for me—it would be strange if I were not fond of her. I fell in love with her at first sight. I remember perfectly how pretty and charming I thought her. And she was so kind to me when I was a child. I was a lonely little creature, and she made a companion of me. I was far happier after she came."

As they drove up to Tarn Hall, Sophy came out on the steps, regardless of the heavy rain.

"Where is he? Couldn't you find him? Has anything happened? Oh, Gay, what shall I do?" she exclaimed tragically. "Oh," clasping her hands with a cry of relief as Gay threw back the rug,

"he is safe! Thank Heaven! Is he all right?"

"Safe and sound, wind and limb," said Gay, brightly.

She sprang down before Thornburgh could go to help her, and lifted the child out.

"Don't wake him, dear; he is in such a nice sleep."

"Bring him into the morning-room; there is nobody there," said Sophy, hurrying on before to open the door.

Jim was left to slumber in peace, while Sophy in the hall told how much she had suffered from anxiety on the child's account.

"I should never have forgiven myself, if the dear little fellow had come to any harm through my carelessness," she protested.

"Yes, dear," said Gay, soothingly, "but you needn't think of that now. No harm has happened to Jim; his appetite was in a very reassuring state when we got to the inn. Wasn't it, Mr. Thornburgh?"

"Jim is all right. But, Miss Rushton, if you stand here in your wet things, you will be the sufferer through his escapade," said Thornburgh, rather bluntly, for he was annoyed at Sophy's detaining Gay at that moment to hear her dilate on her feelings. "Good-bye! I must be off directly, and I shall not see you again."

Gay shook hands, and went upstairs. Mrs. Fletcher came to the door of the drawing-room, and called Thornburgh in, and he obeyed the summons.

CHAPTER X.

PREMIERS AMOURS.

"The primrose of the later year."
In Memoriam.

AS Thornburgh did not return at once to the inn with the members of the party he had gone to seek, Mr. Mildmay drove with his sister to fetch Jim. He missed Sophy and Bridget, who had taken a field path to the inn, and at the cottage he was told that the lady and the little boy had departed. On returning to the inn they found that Mrs. Fletcher's party had already gone, and inferred that they had taken Jim with them.

Mr. Mildmay drove to his house by a short cut, a road with too many steep ups and downs in it for the heavy break; and before going on to Tarn Hall to pick up Jim, he wrote some letters. He was disturbed in this occupation by the nurse, who rushed in, much agitated, to inform him that Jim was missing.

The Tarn Hall gardener had heard from the driver of the break that Master Jim had run away and got lost in the hills. His first impulse had naturally been to walk to Westby Lodge to gather further particulars about this painful incident. He did not accomplish the object of his expedition, but he found a greater pleasure than he had sought—instead of hearing bad news, he gave it.

Mr. Mildmay received the nurse's

report with incredulity. The Fletchers would never have returned without Jim.

Mr. Thornburgh had gone to look for him, the nurse declared; and he had taken two men with him who knew the country well.

Mr. Mildmay began to feel a little alarmed. Something must have befallen Jim, that was plain; and he drove at once to Tarn Hall to find out what had happened. From a window Sophy saw his approach, and went out to the door to meet him.

"Where is Jim?" asked Mr. Mildmay, hurriedly, as he ran up the steps.

Sophy smiled, and signed to him to follow her into the morning-room, where Jim was still sleeping soundly. Mr. Mildmay drew a breath of relief, suddenly

aware that he had been more frightened than he had known on the little fellow's account.

"I might have been sure that he would be safe with *you*," he said, looking at Sophy.

She turned away, and gave an aimless touch to the cushions under Jim's head.

"He wants more care than he gets," said Mr. Mildmay. "I have often thought so lately. He needs a mother. If—do you think — Sophy," hurriedly, "could you do it? I've never forgotten old times—if you would be my wife, we could be very happy."

Sophy turned red, then pale, and looked bewildered.

"But—Gay," she said in a mystified tone, unable to change her point of view

all at once, and recognize that she had made a mistake in her suppositions.

Mr. Mildmay promptly replied to what he supposed she meant.

"It will be better for her if you consent. I should never think of separating you. I honour you for your affection for her and for all that you must have done for her, bringing her up to be such a noble creature. She repays you for it; she is devoted to you, and many a time she has talked to me about you. She has made me really know you, Sophy. I couldn't say much to you—somehow you seemed shy of me—so I had to talk of you to Miss Rushton. You need not hesitate on her account; she shall always have a home under my roof, under *our* roof."

"I—I never thought of this," faltered Sophy, who retained just enough self-

possession to perceive that it would hardly do to explain what she *had* thought of.

"I couldn't get at you," said Mr. Mildmay, ruefully. "I thought sometimes you kept out of my way, and that you mightn't wish to marry again after all you've been through, poor dear!"

Sophy shook her head, and ready tears sprang to her eyes. She had no difficulty in replying to the last remark—this was plain sailing.

"Ah, I *have* been through a great deal!" she sighed.

"But you must not let that villain spoil your whole life," urged the suitor. "You're free of him, and you are young and pretty still. You can't go mourning all your days because you were unlucky once; that would only be making bad worse. You don't care for him still?" with a touch of disgust

in his tone, as it occurred to him that that was possible—women had a way of retaining affection through very bad treatment.

"No, indeed I don't," said Sophy, energetically. "If I had known what he really was, I should never, never have cared for him at all. But I was a silly, romantic girl—and he was a stranger—and—and—oh, I have been *so* sorry for the way in which I behaved to you."

"You can make up for it now, dear, if you will."

"Oh yes," she sighed, blushing, tremulous and tearful as if she had been a young girl.

Jim stretched himself and yawned, and Sophy hastily drew away from Mr. Mildmay.

"I must go. I can't see the others just now. Good-bye;" and she escaped.

Jim sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"I want to go home," he said, in a cross, sleepy tone. "I want my supper."

"All right. Come along, and you shall go home," returned his father, not very enthusiastically.

He would have preferred to remain with Sophy. But the child must be looked after, and his nurse's anxiety must be set at rest. Jim had been put into the dog-cart, and Mr. Mildmay was at the door making apologies to Mrs. Fletcher for the trouble his son had given, when Gay appeared, descending the stairs. Mr. Mildmay crossed the hall towards her, and said something in a low tone. She smiled with deepening colour and a soft

brightness in her eyes, and they exchanged a long hand-clasp.

"I shall come early to-morrow," said Mr. Mildmay to her, and he went out with a touch of consciousness in his expression.

He had asked Thornburgh to drive with him, and that gentleman had accepted the invitation, sending his own cart on with the groom. But Mr. Mildmay did not appear to care for the companion he had secured, for he drove for some time in silence, wearing an aspect of absorption in some blissful dream.

The man was taken by surprise by his own felicity. There had been no romance in his first marriage, and there had been none in his project of a second. He had for some time intended to marry. He wanted more of a home than his sister

could make for him, and he wanted a mother for Jim. There had been one difficulty in his way: he knew nobody that struck him as suitable for the place, and in the quiet routine to which he was accustomed it would have been an unpleasant exertion to undertake travels in search of the "not impossible She."

But he had been making up his mind that he must begin this quest, when Sophy's reappearance in her old home had suggested an easier mode of obtaining what he desired. He need not have any trouble in making acquaintance here. He knew all about Sophy and her family, and was sure of his ground. In marrying her he would introduce as little as possible of a new element into his life. She had been improved very much by the sweet uses of

adversity, and Gay's ardent love for her showed that she would make an admirable stepmother.

Mr. Mildmay felt enough revival of his old affection to anticipate a very fair amount of happiness, and he proposed, feeling that he was doing a wise thing for himself and his child. Sophy's blushes and tears, her embarrassment and happiness, called into life a new set of feelings in her suitor's heart. He forgot his rational view of the situation and her fitness for the post of Jim's mother. She looked so young, so pretty, she was so evidently in love with him, that he fell very thoroughly in love with her. He kissed her quivering lips and glowing cheeks with a thrill of delight utterly unknown to him before; and now he dwelt on those moments with her, and

loved her the better for the happiness she had revealed to him.

Thornburgh grew tired of silence at last, and made a somewhat snappish remark about Jim's conduct that day.

Mr. Mildmay replied that certainly Jim had filled up the measure of his offences.

"You spoilt poor Mrs. Rushton's pleasure, keeping her with you all the afternoon, Jim, and then giving her such a fright. Mrs. Fletcher said she was quite hysterical when they got back."

The effect which this speech should have had on Jim's conscience was rather weakened by the gentle manner in which it was spoken. The last sentence was given in dulcet tones. What a sweet tender soul she was to care so much for the little scapegrace! Mr. Mildmay was

"far gone, far gone." One can scarcely imagine a deeper depth of sentiment for the modern lover than finding hysterics charming.

"You want somebody to look after you that would have a tight hand over you, Master Jim," went on the father. "Miss Rushton would keep him in good order. She is the sort of person to manage him, isn't she?"

Yesterday Thornburgh had thought that it would be a decided piece of good luck for Gay to marry Mr. Mildmay, and with disinterested benevolence had desired to see the match brought about. He had changed his opinion suddenly and entirely that evening when he witnessed their brief colloquy. Seeing Gay's smiling, moved face, he supposed that the matter was settled between them, and he became

aware that he disapproved of the match, and that there were half a dozen objections to it.

Mr. Mildmay's speech, which he took as a reference to Gay's duties as step-mother, did not please him.

"I have no doubt that she would keep him in order," he said coldly. "She has a good deal of strength of will—indeed, almost too much for a woman, it strikes me."

This last remark was made in pure ill-humour. He wanted to stop Mr. Mildmay from talking further about Gay, for he did not feel capable of the effusive congratulations which their relationship and friendliness made proper.

Jim pricked up his ears. He did not understand what Thornburgh had said, but he could discern the coldness and

annoyance in the tone. He had not yet forgiven Gay for the rebuke she had administered that morning. Her sternness had won his fascinated respect and subdued him. But he did not like being subdued, and now his heart sprang up at finding that there was somebody that did not appear to approve of her.

"*I* don't like Miss Rushton," he announced, in his clear treble. "I think she's a horrid girl."

"Alas for human consistency!" Jim would have said, if his vocabulary had stretched so far. Thornburgh, instead of welcoming his sympathy and support, turned a look of disgust upon him, and sharply told him to sit still.

"Jim," said his father, gravely, "never speak again in that way of Miss Rushton. I shall punish you if you do."

"She said it first," Jim defended himself. "She called me a horrid boy."

"And she was quite right," said Thornburgh. "You are a very horrid boy to be so ungrateful for the trouble she took about you this afternoon."

Jim said no more, feeling himself to be in the minority, and there was silence till Westby Lodge was reached. When Jim had run into the house, Mr. Mildmay turned to Thornburgh, with a little shyness in his manner.

"I want your congratulations, Miles."

"On what account?"—neutrally.

"I'm going to marry again—it is just settled. Sophy and I have made it up."

"My dear fellow!" Thornburgh grasped the successful suitor's hand fervently. "I am rejoiced to hear it. I congratulate you with all my heart, and Sophy, too."

He was rejoiced, not only that Sophy was engaged, but that Gay was not; and he walked to his house, resolved that he would persevere till he had won Gay out of her reserve, and they were quite good friends. She could be very pleasant—he had found that out that afternoon—and he would like to be able to count on pleasant looks and words from her.

CHAPTER XI.

LOOKING FORWARD.

"Vous me la promettez
Votre amitié?
Monsieur . . .
Quoi? vous y résistez?"

Le Misanthrope.

SOPHY did not proclaim her engagement that evening. The dinner-bell rang directly after Mr. Mildmay had gone, and she had to obey its summons. After dinner she had no opportunity of private speech with her sister-in-law, and felt too shy to make one.

She kept silence, but her air and behaviour might have betrayed her secret

to Mrs. Fletcher, if that lady had been quick-witted. There was a new glow and animation in her face. She did not, as usual, submissively labour on the table-cover which her sister-in-law had set her to embroider; and she made no pretence of listening to the reading, but lay back in her chair, evidently absorbed in her thoughts.

"Are you tired, Sophy?" said Mrs. Fletcher, at last.

"Not at all," returned Sophy, smiling brightly.

"You haven't your work. Shall Mabel get it for you?"

"No, thank you. I don't want to do any work," said Sophy, frankly.

She enjoyed that moment. It was delicious to feel herself free of the mild power which had constrained her.

"Perhaps you will read, then, instead of me?" suggested Mrs. Fletcher.

"Oh no, thanks. You read much better than I do, and I hate reading aloud," declared Sophy, recklessly.

When bedtime came, Gay followed her stepmother into her room.

"Haven't you any news for me, Sophy?" she asked reproachfully. "Mr. Mildmay was much kinder than you seem disposed to be; *he* asked for my congratulations."

"Oh, you know, then?" said Sophy, relieved that she had not to make the announcement.

She was a little doubtful as to how Gay might take it—not that she imagined Gay would feel any jealousy or disappointment on her own account. What Mr. Mildmay had said of his talks with her showed that she could not have been deluded about

his intentions. But she might not quite approve of her stepmother's marrying again. One never could tell how Gay would feel about anything connected with her father. Sometimes, in his lifetime, she had used the plainest of plain English to express her reprobation of him, and at other times she had been angry at a word of blame from another person.

"You don't object?" said Sophy.

"Object? You absurd dear," cried Gay, hugging her, "how could I possibly object to a thing that made you happy?"

"Oh, I didn't know. Some people are prejudiced against widows marrying, and you might dislike it. Your father——"

"Why, that is just what makes me so delighted," said Gay, replying to the meaning which underlay Sophy's obscure utterances. "How could my father's

daughter be anything but glad that you are to have some compensation for your troubles, dear? I hope that you will be very, very happy. Oh, I am glad that it has all come right. I was beginning to feel very anxious about it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, of course, I saw what Mr. Mildmay wanted," returned Gay, laughing. "But you were so ungracious to the poor man that it was alarming. I asked Mr. Thornburgh to tell me whether there was any reason for the way you behaved, and he saddened me by the information that there was some old coolness between you."

"Oh"—colouring—"that is a very old story."

"I felt like a matchmaking mother to-day," went on Gay, energetically. "I was determined that Mr. Mildmay should

have a chance of making himself agreeable to you; but you wouldn't let my little schemes succeed. When I tried to leave you together after luncheon, you were really most provoking, Sophy. I wanted to shake you. Then you shut yourself up with Jim, though I was more than willing to take that place."

"I wished to do it."

"I suppose you were quite right. It was more dignified not to be manœuvred into a *tête-à-tête*, and no doubt Mr. Mildmay would admire your reserve."

Sophy drew herself up, and her face beamed. It was intensely gratifying to be regarded as dignified and reserved, and she began to feel that all the mortifications of the earlier part of the day were blessings in disguise if they enabled her to produce such a new and striking effect.

"It will be a good thing for you, as well as for me," she said, radiant with satisfaction. "He told me that you must live with us; and, Gay, you really must. It will make me much happier."

"It is very sweet of you to wish it, dear," said Gay, softly.

"That's only a way of putting me off," said Sophy, shrewdly; "but we shall see. Mr. Mildmay will get his own way, and I am sure he will never allow you to be a public singer; he would think it quite shocking. I won't talk to you about it —he shall do it."

"We won't talk of it to-night, at all events," returned Gay, smiling.

A half-pained, half-amused look had come into her face as Sophy poured contempt upon her calling; but it passed away at once. Sophy did not mean to

hurt her, and she was not to be blamed because she was so imbued with the prejudices of her caste that she considered the work which had given her bread degrading.

Gay was so capable of taking another's point of view that she had always felt a certain humorous sympathy with Sophy's self-pity because she must depend on what she greatly disliked, and she could have forgiven a great deal to Sophy's tactless tongue at that moment. The girl was overflowing with joy at her stepmother's happiness. It lifted a burden from her to know that this victim of her father's reckless selfishness was to suffer no longer; life had never been so rose-coloured to her before.

It was fixed that the wedding should

take place early in October. Mr. Mildmay was anxious that it should be as soon as possible, and Sophy made no difficulties —she did not desire to prolong her stay at Tarn Hall. Mrs. Fletcher behaved generously on the occasion, and advanced a handsome sum that the bride might have an outfit which should do credit to her family. Miss Mildmay gave up her visit to the seaside—she had to see that the house was got ready for the newly married pair, and Gay was very busy in helping Sophy with her purchases.

One day, shortly before the wedding, Gay was walking to Westby Lodge, when she fell in with Thornburgh. He had seen scarcely anything of her in the bustle of preparation which had engrossed her since the picnic, and he was glad of the

meeting; it gave him an opportunity of carrying out his determination to make her friendly to him. He joined her, explaining that he, too, was bound for Westby Lodge, and he was charmed to find that he had not lost the slight advance he had made during their search for Jim. She was not stiff and distant, and presently she began talking of her own affairs in a confidential strain.

"Mr. Mildmay has asked me to live with them," she said, in a pause in their chat about the engaged couple. "He asked me very nicely, as if he really meant it, and I have consented to stay with them, for a time at least."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Thornburgh.

"I think I may do it. I can be of use to Sophy in the housekeeping, and I will

be Jim's governess. I think I shall fairly earn my food and clothes."

He made a gesture of deprecation.

"What an odious way of putting it!"

"So many things in life are odious," she said, with a laugh.

"I think even your independence may be satisfied; you will owe Mildmay nothing. But it seems to me, if I may venture to say so, that you carry your pride and independence to a morbid pitch."

"Oh no!" she returned quickly. "Poor people cannot be too proud. Pride is a luxury for the rich, but it is a necessity for the poor, if they are to respect themselves at all. I couldn't live at Westby Lodge if I had to eat the bread of idleness, let Mr. Mildmay and Sophy say what they would."

"Well, I am glad that they have per-

suaded you to stay with them; it is a much more suitable life for a young lady than working out in the world," said Thornburgh. "But I suppose that you are very sorry to give up singing?"

"I am sorry—yes," she said slowly; then she went on more fluently, "but I don't feel quite so heroic as you imagine, nor quite so independent. At the bottom of my heart I have a feeling of relief that I needn't go into the world again and fight for a place and a living. I would rather stay under shelter, for the present, at least; it is such dreadfully hard work to make one's way alone. I have lost a good deal of my nerve. I used to think it a fine thing to support one's self, but now I have a poor-spirited craving for peace and security. I should like to sing again—that was delightful when I could do it, and

hoped to get on. But if one doesn't get on—oh, it is dreadful! I have lain awake at night, and wondered whether there is poverty in the next world, and felt cold with horror to think that perhaps we might be even worse off after death than in this life. It was absurd, I know, but the fear was like a nightmare."

She had been talking in a rapid, absent fashion, more to herself than to him, looking before her as she walked. As she finished her speech, she raised her eyes, and saw the pitying, moved expression with which he was regarding her. She bit her lip, coloured deeply, and looked away at once.

"I beg your pardon for inflicting such a prosing upon you, Mr. Thornburgh," she said, in a constrained tone. "Nothing is in such bad taste as to trouble other

people with one's complaints, I know. I am sorry I have bored you."

"Pray don't be sorry. I was not bored at all."

"I am not often egotistical, but sometimes one wants to talk of one's self, and there is nobody here that I can speak to about my affairs but you. The Fletchers don't know so much as you do, and Mabel couldn't understand me—she doesn't know what care is. You see how I came to victimize you?"

"Oh yes, I see clearly that I am not to take your confidences as a proof that you regard me as your friend, Miss Rushton, and I am not to be flattered by them. You only spoke to me for want of a more congenial auditor."

She looked up at him with an air of surprise and perplexity.

"I did not mean to vex you," she said gently.

"You could not suppose that I should be gratified by being told that you would have preferred another listener if you could have had one?"

"It does sound very rude," acknowledged Gay. "I am very sorry. I only meant to explain how I was inconsiderate enough to treat you to such an outpouring."

"I took the outpouring as a compliment," said Thornburgh. "I imagined it meant that you reckoned me as one of your friends. You don't?" he added, with a half-smile, as she looked at him with a more marked expression of surprise than before.

It was a new idea to her that he wished to be on any other terms than

those of indifferent acquaintances. He had certainly told her once that she would find that Sophy's people were her friends. But that had meant merely that they would take a benevolent interest in her; what he spoke of now was something personal and equal.

"I never thought of it," she replied frankly.

"Have I made myself so very disagreeable?"—with a shade of mortification in his voice.

"Oh no, no! Indeed, I did not mean that. But——"

She said no more, and he began talking of something else, reflecting that he had been acting in a way that was not likely to win further confidences from her. She was as shy as a wild bird, and must be wooed gently out of her proud reserve;

his stupid betrayal of annoyance had probably startled her to a greater distance.

They soon reached Westby Lodge, and went separate ways—Gay to see Miss Mildmay, Thornburgh to confer with the master of the house.

"I am glad you have come this afternoon," said Miss Mildmay, cordially. "I was wishing particularly to see you, for I have a proposal to make to you."

She proceeded to explain that she wished to spend a few weeks in town while the bride and bridegroom were away on their honeymoon, and she begged that Gay would accompany her. There were many things to be got for the house which would be most conveniently selected in London; and they could judiciously combine business and pleasure.

"I really must have some change and

fun," said she, "for I find, to my horror, that I am booked to live for some time with an old aunt. I thought of going abroad for the winter, you know, and seeing something new and fresh; but this tiresome relative puts in a claim to my society, and I don't see my way to refusing her."

"You wouldn't like to neglect her, of course," remarked Gay.

"It is all nonsense about neglecting her," said Lucy, rather fretfully. "She doesn't need me at all; she is hale and strong, and she has plenty of society. Her doctor and the curate take her all the gossip; she has a confidential maid who reads to her; and she has a score or so of intimates who are always calling upon her. She is quite happy as she is."

"But she wishes to have you."

"That is merely because she thinks that it is the proper thing for me to live with some relation, and she has a notion that elderly people have a right to the company of the spinsters of the family. It is a most unreasonable idea. Why can't Aunt Eliza leave me to my own devices? It is hard that I must be bored to death because I am unattached."

"Why don't you make a stroke for freedom?" was Gay's pertinent demand.

Lucy raised her hands with a gesture of helplessness.

"Because I am not strong-minded enough, I suppose. When Aunt Eliza talks of her loneliness and longing to have a companion, I can't be a brute and say that I know she is not at all lonely, and can be perfectly comfortable without me. I must go for a time, at least; perhaps my

presence will convince her that it is a mistake to have me with her. We shall probably quarrel desperately before long," said Lucy, cheerfully. "I live in hope of that."

"You would never quarrel with an old lady," said Gay, laughing. "I know you better."

"Oh, wouldn't I? My dear, it isn't a difficult thing to compass with Aunt Eliza. She is well off, and she has an agreeable way of hinting that those who please her will find it to their advantage. Now, if she does that often, I shall certainly fall out with her. I could stand living with her much better if she were poor. One would feel that it was worth while to make the sacrifice. But to put up with the dulness of her house and know that she thinks one is doing a very

good thing for one's self is a little too much for my patience."

"Well, your sacrifice seems to me all the finer because it doesn't appear a sacrifice."

"It won't strike other people in that light," said Lucy, drily. "But, before I go into retreat with Aunt Eliza at Castleton, I must have a fling in town. We will do all we can, Gay; and I shall spend the winter in mournfully recalling our dissipations."

Thornburgh came in to speak to his cousin after a time.

"I hope I am not intruding," he said. "You must have had time to talk over all the frocks that are to be worn at the wedding."

"We haven't mentioned frocks," returned Lucy. "A much more interesting subject has occupied us."

"I thought ladies talked little but *chiffons* before a wedding."

"You must know very frivolous people in London"—contemptuously. "Gay and I have been planning a pleasure trip, my dear cousin."

"This is great luck for me," he said, when Lucy had unfolded her project. "I hope you will take me out sometimes with you, and let me share your amusements."

Lucy regarded him dubiously.

"Thanks; you are good-natured, Miles. But I do hate dragging a man about, wondering all the time whether he is fainting for a cigar. We can do very well alone."

"I assure you that I shall never faint on your hands, Lucy. I am able to abstain from tobacco for several hours, if it is necessary. I can 'suffer and be strong.'"

"You are indeed a strong man," quoth Lucy, admiringly; "but you needn't tax your powers of endurance on our account."

"Ah, you don't know what you lose in refusing my attendance. I am a capital guide. I could pass a stiff examination in routes and cab fares. Do employ me occasionally. You will find me very obliging and anxious to give satisfaction."

Said Lucy afterwards—

"I hope I was not ungracious to Miles; but I felt some scruples about making use of him, because I think that the Fletchers are rather unreasonable in that way."

"He seems quite the authority of the family," said Gay.

"Oh, quite! Mrs. Fletcher is the sort of woman that must refer things to a man; and when her husband died, she made as much of a support of Miles as she could.

He is really very kind to her and the girls. Of course, he has always been very much at home at Tarn Hall, for old Mr. Fletcher was his guardian. Now he returns the benefits he received."

CHAPTER XII.

THE PAST.

"I am a messenger.
Sure, you have some hideous matter to deliver."
Twelfth Night.

THE wedding was over, and Sophy had laid down the name of Rushton with profound relief and thanksgiving at getting rid of that badge of failure and humiliation. At all the tea-parties in the neighbourhood it was agreed that the ceremony went off well. The bride had looked very pretty, and so young that it was difficult to believe that she was a widow, and her gown of palest grey satin was extremely becoming.

It was a piece of great good luck for her to make such a match, and it must be a great satisfaction to Mrs. Fletcher to have her sister-in-law so well disposed of. Mrs. Fletcher was a very amiable woman, but it is a serious matter to support a relation-in-law for life; and she would have found it a burden as years went on and her children grew up. And then there was Miss Rushton. It would have been really too much if the Fletchers had had to lend her a helping hand. It was very generous of Mr. Mildmay to give that girl a home, wasn't it? And it was wonderfully good of the bride to be willing to keep her stepdaughter with her. It wasn't every woman of thirty that would care to have a young woman in her house, especially a girl that had taking ways. Miss Rushton wasn't exactly

pretty, perhaps, but she could look very nice—she had looked really well at the wedding, in that cream-coloured frock—and her singing was an attraction. It was to be hoped that Mrs. Mildmay would have no reason to regret her kindness. Oh, well, it might answer—as some one suggested that there was a warm affection between the bride and Miss Rushton. They were certainly fond of each other; and Miss Rushton did seem a person of sense, who would not put herself forward to try to attract attention. If she was discreet and kept her proper place, all would go well.

The bridal pair went to Paris for three weeks, and Miss Mildmay carried out her plan of making a stay in town with Gay.

One fine afternoon at the end of October, Gay, to use an ancient formula of the

novelist, might have been seen walking alone up Albany Street. She was on her way to call upon Fanny Gresham, who had been a fellow-worker of hers, and had shown her a good deal of kindness. She would have felt herself ungrateful and hard-hearted, if she had not paid a visit to this old friend when she was near her; but she had put it off as long as she could.

Fanny Gresham's lodgings were close to those in which Thornburgh had found Sophy, and Gay shrank from visiting the dreary scene of her humiliation and hardship, and from all the recollections which the place and Fanny's talk would call up. That time had grown wonderfully dim in her mind of late, unsubstantial as a bad dream; and the more shadowy it grew, the more she disliked the idea of reviving its memory. So time had passed

till the last day but one of her stay in town, and she had set forth rather ashamed of her tardiness in fulfilling the obligations of "auld acquaintance."

After all, when it came to the point, it seemed that her fears of the expedition had been greatly exaggerated. She was walking by the way which had been familiar to her in the darkest time of distress, but she passed along unscathed by the associations. The Gay Rushton who had carried such a load of care past those houses was some one far off. This Gay Rushton was sorry for her, but she was too warm in the sunshine which had brightened her lot lately to be chilled by those old troubles. She was not thinking of them, but of the present and the future, and feeling that life was wonderfully good. The weeks since Sophy's wedding had

been full of pleasure; the time had passed so smoothly and brightly in holiday-making with two congenial companions.

Notwithstanding Miss Mildmay's scruples about employing her cousin, he had been a diligent attendant upon the two ladies, and had made himself very useful to them. It had been an excellent opportunity of carrying on the work of taming Gay, which he had resolved to accomplish, and he had made the most of it. His self-imposed task proved even more piquant and interesting than it had appeared in anticipation; he found it a labour he delighted in to woo her friendliness. He had gained a good deal of ground since the day when she had apologized for her confidences, and he was rejoiced at his success, and had not yet stopped to ask himself why he should

take such pains to please this young woman. He accepted the fact that this whimsical undertaking of his to break down her reserve gave him keen enjoyment, and he did not inquire into causes.

And Gay was enjoying herself very much too, without subjecting her feelings to critical analysis. She went up "long unlovely" Albany Street, and turned off into the much unlovelier Camden Town High Street, with a smile in her eyes, indulging in dreamy, aimless thoughts, and so absorbed in them that it was an effort to rouse herself when she arrived at the house whither she was bound; and she shook off her dream and turned her attention to her visit with distinct reluctance.

When she entered Miss Gresham's

sitting-room, that young person regarded her with a surprise which she did not attempt to conceal.

"My!" she exclaimed, staring hard. "You do look different to what you used to be, Gay. You've improved in looks, I can tell you."

"How are you, Fanny?"

"Oh, just about the same as usual. I'm getting on a bit better. I've got to sing in a trio in this new piece and say a few speeches."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Gay, warmly. "I do hope you will soon get a really good part."

"Oh, thanks, yes. I think I shall do something this time. But haven't you seen me? Surely you've been to the old place?"

Gay replied that she had not. She

was privately grateful to Thornburgh that when Miss Mildmay had proposed to go to that theatre he had damned the performance with faint praise, and persuaded her to go somewhere else.

"Well, I declare! I should have thought you would want to go there first, just to feel how jolly it is to have done with it," observed Fanny. "I wish you could see me. The dress is really pretty, and it suits me."

Fanny expatiated on her doings and her prospects, and Gay listened sympathetically. When the dear theme of her own affairs was pretty well exhausted, Miss Gresham accorded some attention to those of her friend.

"You're in luck, Gay!" she remarked. "So you've given up singing?"

"For the present, yes."

"You will be quite a fine lady. You look an awful swell in that frock."

The frock had been provided by Sophy. It was simple enough, but the cut and fit were excellent, as Miss Gresham's instructed eye at once perceived.

"I can tell you I was surprised to hear that you were going to live with Mrs. Rushton and her new husband."

Gay flushed a little at this plain speaking.

"For," continued Fanny, "I should have expected that when she got such a rise she would have left you to shift for yourself, and quite forget that you used to starve to get bread-and-chesee for her."

"She could never be so odious," said Gay, quickly.

"Most people would have done that," declared Fanny. "It's the way of the world, my dear. The more you do for

other people the less they'll do for you, and the greater fool you are for your pains. That's what I've learnt."

"Yet you have done a good deal for me, Fanny. I can remember how kind you often were."

"Oh, I didn't do much for you."

"When I was ill, and you——"

"Never mind that. I didn't do enough to make you behave badly in return. I lent you a trifle, and you paid me back—that's all. But I should be afraid to do a great deal for a person. You've made it pay, but Mrs. Rushton is quite an exception to the rule, I can tell you."

Gay shook her head. Five months ago, when the brine of defeat was bitter in her mouth, she might have relished Miss Gresham's cynical wisdom and acquiesced in it—with a reservation in

favour of Sophy. But to-day it jarred upon her. She was in a bright, hopeful mood, and at such times one wants to think well of one's fellows. She made a diversion by producing a present which Sophy had sent by her to Fanny, and in admiring the pretty brooch that young woman forgot the lore which life had taught her.

"Oh, by the way, Gay, I have something to tell you," she exclaimed abruptly. "I declare I nearly forgot it—stupid of me! It's this. A man turned up at the theatre a little while ago, and asked me questions about you. He wanted to know where you were. *I* wasn't going to tell him, you may be sure. I didn't like the look of him, and I didn't know what he might be after." (Fanny did not care to say plainly that she suspected

the man was a creditor whom Gay could not conveniently pay.) "So I sent him about his business, and said I couldn't give him your address."

"I have no idea who it could be," said Gay. "What was he like?"

"Dark and thin—nothing much to look at. He got no satisfaction out of me, and then I found that he had been pumping Lily Lovaine, and she told him that you were in town, and coming to see me. I felt quite wild with her, for I thought I should have the man worrying me again. But he didn't—I suppose he saw that it was no go."

"He did not hint at his business with me?"

"He didn't say a word about it, and I haven't the ghost of a notion what it was."

"I can't imagine what it could be,"

said Gay, with contracted brows, an expression which made her face much more familiar to Fanny than the bright look she had worn when she arrived. Miss Gresham's guess was beside the mark—Gay had left no unpaid debts behind her; but for a moment she wondered whether this stranger was a creditor of her father's. She had been dunned by such people several times since he had vanished from the scene.

"Nothing of importance, if you are in the dark about it," said Fanny, lightly. "Perhaps he wanted to offer you an engagement. Well, good-bye," as Gay rose. "I'm glad I've seen you. What are you going to do to-night?"

"We are going to the Kemble."

"Stalls, I suppose? You'll go in style now. You *are* lucky"—with a sigh. "I

wish you were coming to see 'Phyllis and Corydon' instead. I should like you to see my costume. Let's see—when are you leaving town? The day after to-morrow?—ah, I don't think you could get places at such short notice; the piece has caught on."

Gay walked away quickly when she had said good-bye. She had made a long call, and she must not be late for tea. She took an omnibus to Portland Road Station, whence she was going by Underground to Kensington, where Miss Mildmay was staying. She descended to the platform, and began to walk up and down as she waited for an Inner Circle train, sublimely indifferent to the choking atmosphere of the station, forgetting what she had heard from Fanny, for she had fallen back into her pleasant reverie.

A man came up to her, and, touching his hat, held out a note.

"You are making a mistake; that cannot be for me," she said.

"I think there's no mistake, miss," he returned. "Your name is Rushton, is it not?"

Gay took the note. There was a smile on her face as she opened it. She glanced at the contents, a very few lines, and hastily walked to a little distance. For full three minutes she stood with her back to the messenger, holding the bit of paper in her hand, and staring fixedly at it. When she turned, smile and colour had left her face, and her eyes had a dilated startled look.

"I was to show you the way, miss," said the man.

Gay did not consciously notice any

point in his appearance; she was stunned for the time by the shock she had just received. But later she remembered him well enough: a man of middle height, with stooping shoulders, a thin, hollow-cheeked face, and dark eyes with something furtive in their glance. Afterwards she recalled these things, but at that moment she was as little aware of them as a prisoner would be of the features and manner of the policeman that has just arrested him.

"You will show me the way?" she repeated stupidly.

"Yes, miss. If you can come now, I'll get a cab outside."

"Very well," she rejoined.

The man walked down the platform, and she followed mechanically, as if she were walking in her sleep.

The train she had been waiting for rushed in. She passed on, thinking in a dull way that it was a pity it had not come five minutes earlier. Ah, the difference, if it had carried her away before that man found her, and now, seated in it, she were going, in light-hearted ignorance of this dreadful thing, to peace and kindness. She saw her mood of five minutes ago as if it had been the mood of somebody apart from herself; and the contrast of that blithe carelessness and glad hopefulness with the nightmare that had fallen upon her roused her from her stupefaction.

The pain gave her energy to make a desperate struggle to escape. As the train began to move, she sprang into the nearest compartment, and the door was banged on her by an angrily remonstrating porter. The train puffed onwards. She

caught a glimpse of her conductor ascending the stairs; he was not looking back, and evidently had not missed her yet; and she sank into a corner with a gasp of relief.

She sat there stunned and motionless, looking before her with wide blank eyes, seeing nothing of her fellow-passengers, never noticing the stations they passed. She could not think; she could only feel that something dreadful had happened—a worse catastrophe than her most morbidly fearful mood could have forecast had befallen, and she was overcome with horror and dismay.

It was a crowded train, and three or four young men presently got in, who could find only standing room. One who stood near Gay apologized for inconveniencing her. She did not hear, and

he reddened, as she made no acknowledgment of his civility, and began to sing a popular street ditty loudly to show this well-dressed lady that he was not impressed by her "'aughty airs." But, presently, as the train emerged into daylight, he got a full view of her face, and seeing her deadly pallor and rigid features, he forgave her. She was in terrible pain of body or mind, that was evident, and the youth stopped abruptly in his song, and was a model of quiet decorum for the rest of his brief journey.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRESENT.

"That her sweete peace and pleasures did annoy,
Troubled with terrour and unquiet jarre."

The Faery Queene.

MISS MILDMAY had also been making a call that afternoon, and she returned to find Thornburgh, who had been asked to tea, waiting for her. She apologized for her late appearance.

"I could not get away sooner, but I knew Gay would be here in good time for tea, and I trusted to her to entertain you. Haven't they told her that you are here? How stupid of them!"

"The servant said Miss Rushton was out."

"Oh no, she isn't—she must have come back. Please ring for tea at once, Miles, and I will go and find her. She must have fallen asleep, or forgotten everything in writing a letter to Sophy!"

Lucy returned alone from her quest.

"She *is* out," she said. "She must have been detained. We won't wait for her—she can have fresh tea made when she appears. I am quite worn out," sighed Miss Mildmay, sinking into a chair. "Visits to old friends are awfully depressing things."

"You aren't very flattering to the old friends."

"Oh, it is most depressing and melancholy to see them! The talk is like a series of extracts from the first column of

the *Times*, only it is worse, for you have to hear particulars of the end of the departed, which you are spared in the paper; and you come away feeling years older than you thought yourself, for you are told that your friend would have known you anywhere, which means, of course, that you are sadly altered. But the call has done me good in one way—it will provide a subject of conversation for the first fortnight, at least, of my stay at Castleton. I shall have to describe Mrs. Molyneux's house, drawing-room furniture, dress, china; relate all the details I have gathered about the family, where the married daughters are living, what the sons are doing, and so forth. Then Aunt Eliza will talk over these things bit by bit, and retail them to her visitors—oh, Mrs. Molyneux will be useful!"

They had nearly finished tea when the door was slowly opened, and Gay entered. Lucy turned to her with a laughing reproof for her unpunctuality, and broke off halfway.

"My dear Gay," in a tone of alarm, "you are not well! Has anything happened to you?"

"I went wrong on the Underground, and that made me late," returned Gay, with a faint smile.

"But even the air of the Underground wouldn't make you so white."

"My head aches badly. I must lie down, if you will excuse me. The pain is like a knife."

Lucy was full of compassion. She went with Gay to her room, darkened the windows, gave her a cup of tea, and would have bathed her head, but Gay declined this attention.

"I only want quiet," she said; "it will go off in time."

Lucy left her, and rejoined her other guest, whom she found looking rather gloomy.

"Poor girl! she is quite upset," she said. "It is a thousand pities that she should be ill to-night, when we were going to the Kemble."

"She won't be able to go?"

"Of course not! How could she, with a bad nervous headache?"

"I thought that she might feel better presently. Perhaps it would do her good to go out."

Lucy regarded her cousin with severe contempt.

"My dear Miles, you are enviably ignorant of headache. Gay is only fit to stay in her own room at present, and I

must give up the theatre. It will make no difference to you," added Lucy, with a calm assumption of guileless simplicity; "you can go by yourself."

Miss Mildmay knew very well that it made all the difference in the world. She had not observed Thornburgh's walk and conversation during the last three weeks for nothing.

An hour later she entered Gay's room.

"Here are some grapes which Miles sends you," she said. "He is deeply concerned about your headache."

"Please thank him—he is very kind."

"He is woefully disappointed because you can't go to the theatre. It was touching to see how his face fell when I told him that he must go alone. He suggested that it might do you good to make an effort, but I set the enormity of his

inconsiderateness before him, and tried to make him ashamed of his selfishness."

"Oh, but there is no need to make such a fuss," said Gay, after a pause. "It would be better to go out than to stay here. It is stupid to give in, and I want to go. Yes, I can do it," cutting short Lucy's remonstrance. "I feel better already, and if you will send me a cup of coffee and something to eat, I shall be quite right at eight."

Lucy made no vigorous opposition to this sudden resolve. She thought that Gay was overtaxing herself; but she was not one of the dreadful people who want to direct all around them, and she sagely considered that Gay had a right to please herself. If she chose to pay for amusement to-night by a worse headache to-morrow, it was her own business.

But Gay did not feel that she was making any exertion. Her mood had changed as Lucy spoke; the clouds had parted in her mental sky, and one point of light had shone out intense and brilliant. Lucy's remark about Thornburgh's disappointment was not the first that she had made to the same effect, and Gay had hitherto regarded such speeches as mere nonsense, not to be taken seriously. But now—perhaps because she was in a state of highly strung excitement—the words arrested her attention, and she knew that there was some truth in them. He did care for her presence; he would be sorry if he did not see her that evening.

A sharp thrill of joy ran through her; the sweetness of that thought prevailed over the misery that had overwhelmed her. In the reaction of the moment she

turned from the impending calamity. It would not mend matters to shut herself up, brooding over what had happened, and torturing herself with fears. She could do nothing; she could only wait till the bolt fell—meanwhile, why should she not take the good she could get? For three hours that evening she might be with Thornburgh; they would talk and laugh as they had done that morning, and she might be cheated into at least partial forgetfulness of what she had learnt since then.

When the time for starting came, Gay was quite able to go. She had great elasticity of temperament, and was admirably adapted for a hard life. When misfortune gave her a fall, she soon struggled to her feet again. She had been prostrated by the occurrence of that afternoon, but

that effect would not have lasted long in any case, and her recovery was the quicker for the stimulant which Lucy had unwittingly administered.

They were going downstairs when there came a loud knock and ring at the door. Gay stopped short, and caught at the rail of the balusters blindly.

"You are ill," said Thornburgh, who was just behind her. "You must not attempt to go—it is too much for you."

As he spoke, the man who had summoned the hansoms for the theatre-goers opened the door, and in reply to an inquiry, said briefly—

"Not here—two doors further down."

Gay drew a long breath, and the startled look left her face.

"Oh yes; I am quite well. I want to go. It was only—the noise startled me,"

she said, with a smile, and she ran quickly down after Lucy.

Her heart swelled with relief. Fate was merciful; she was to have a few hours' reprieve.

When at the theatre Thornburgh saw her again in full light, she was pale, but her eyes were shining, and she had never looked more brilliant. In the pauses between the acts she talked with unflagging vivacity.

"I am glad you came," said Lucy, once; "you seem to enjoy it so much. It is a very pretty play."

"Oh, it is charming," returned Gay, "and the acting is so good. I am enjoying it immensely. I must make the most of it, for it is the last play we shall see, you know."

"Alas, yes!" sighed Miss Mildmay.

"Why need you remind me that we are going to dulness and monotony the day after to-morrow?"

"Don't think of it," said Gay, laughing. "I will not think even of to-morrow—the present is pleasant, and that is enough."

The present was more than pleasant. In her mood of reckless excitement, there was a keen delight in the enjoyment she snatched that evening. She was thrillingly aware that Thornburgh was occupied with her; she had never been so conscious of his admiring looks, never known him so attentive to her before. And she liked the play, and was charmed with the acting. All her faculties were awake; her perceptions had never been clearer—nothing was lost upon her.

When Lucy spoke of the day after the morrow, a sickening pang of fear shot

through her at the thought of what the future held: the misery, shame, and despair which would blot out sunshine and pleasantness from her life. But it was not yet; to-morrow was a long way off.

The play came to an end; the curtain fell, and they made their way out.

Gay looked wistfully at Thornburgh as she gave him her hand and said "Good night;" she was saying to herself—

"It is the last time, most likely, that he will speak to me and look at me in that way. After it comes out, he will hate the sight of me."

When she and Miss Mildmay entered their sitting-room, she went at once to the side-table on which letters for them were always laid.

"Do you expect a letter?" asked Lucy, yawning.

"I thought something might have come while we were out; but there is nothing."

"No doubt you will get it to-morrow. Good night, dear; sleep well, you look very pale and tired."

Gay had no doubt that it would come to-morrow; in some way she would receive the summons she had refused to obey that afternoon, and she would not be able to evade compliance with it a second time. She had fled at the prompting of a blind impulse of revolt and dread, to put off the evil day for a little time, and she had secured a few hours' delay. She hoped for no more.

It was not till the next day had dragged itself out, every hour weighted with sick suspense and dread, without bringing the call she fully expected, that a faint gleam of hope broke upon her. Perhaps her

whereabouts was not known. As she considered the matter calmly, she could see that it was very unlikely that her present address should have been learnt by the person she dreaded to see. He had made inquiries of Fanny Gresham, and she had refused to give any information. That was the only way in which he was likely to trace her; for no one connected with the old life, except Fanny Gresham, knew anything of her now. She must have been seen when she was in Camden Town, and that man had been sent after her. If she were hidden now, she was safe; the neighbourhood of Tarn Hall was the very last place in the world in which he would think of looking for her.

As this possibility came before Gay's mind, she fell on her knees in an agony of prayer too intense to find coherent

expression. She had prayed for help when she and Sophy were at the lowest, and want had come so close that she had been forced to humble herself to beg from the Fletchers; but that prayer had been weak compared with the inarticulate, passionate cry which went up from her heart now. It was a more terrible thing than hunger that she feared.

No letter came for Gay before she and her friend started the next morning on their return journey. As the train glided out of Euston, Miss Mildmay was too busy in settling herself in her corner to notice her companion, and she did not see how the hand with which Gay held an illustrated paper before her face was shaking. Lucy put up the window, tucked a rug round her knees, and cut open a paper, while Gay looked steadily

at a picture of a royal funeral abroad, and regained the self-control which had been almost broken down by the relief of feeling that the danger was over. She must have heard by this time if she was to hear at all.

At Castleton, Miss Mildmay's journey ended, and Gay went on alone to Bayford. There, on the platform, she found Jim, who had been staying with some relations of his on his mother's side, and had only returned a little earlier that day. He took off his cap and bowed ceremoniously to Gay; then, forgetting his dignity, he bestowed a strangling hug upon her.

"You dear!" cried Gay, returning the embrace. "Are you glad to see me?"

Jim nodded.

"I want you to make tents for my

soldiers. The girls were so stupid at Uncle John's—they wouldn't make tents and sails. I'm glad you're coming to live in our house, Gay. Now you can make lots of things for me. You're much jollier than Aunt Lucy. Did she send me any sweets?"

"Yes, a big box of chocolate, which you don't deserve, Master Jim, if you speak so unkindly of her."

"I hope it's chocolate creams. I don't like plain chocolate," said Jim, disregarding the rebuke in this anxiety.

He looked very well, and was in radiant good spirits. He had enjoyed his stay at his uncle's thoroughly, and had distinguished himself greatly by mischief and wilfulness, leaving behind him a name which was often to be used by the nursery authorities "to point a moral," and by

his young cousins "to adorn a tale." It was well that he had made the most of his time, for before his departure his harassed relatives had resolved not to invite him again till he had outgrown the heedlessness of childhood.

He led Gay through the booking-office to the waiting carriage.

"I'm going on the box," he announced.

The coachman looked as if this was not a pleasure to himself, but he made no remonstrance. Jim climbed up, and for the first half-mile of the drive a spirited struggle went on between him and the coachman for the possession of the whip, which Gay could follow, as Jim's part was distinctly audible. It ended in a compromise. The coachman yielded the whip on Jim's pledging his word of honour that he would only use it when

he had received express directions to do so.

Gay smiled to herself; she could not be severe on Jim while her heart was warm with pleasure in his affection and welcome. Henceforth her judgment was hopelessly biassed where he was concerned. He adopted her so fully and readily as his elder sister, and showed such firm faith in her willingness to accept that *rôle*, that it was not in woman's heart to avoid falling in love with him.

He trotted about after her next day as she made preparations for the bride, who was to arrive in the afternoon. Gay found herself very busy. The cook at Westby Lodge was a shrewd person, and saw at once that Miss Rushton would have more to do with the management

than the nominal mistress of the house, and she referred all the arrangements to her.

It did Gay good to consider and settle the little household matters; it was inexpressibly soothing to have to think of things so far apart from the dread shadow that had been haunting her. In the atmosphere of domestic comfort, taking "'a few doses of plain daylight life," she grew calm and reassured. Tragedy was too incongruous with this substantial humdrum household.

She felt quite cheerful and hopeful when she went to the door to receive the bride and bridegroom. It was a bright October afternoon. The sunlight lay warm upon the russet bracken on the fells, and the blue sky was without a cloud. Sophy came up the steps, beaming with smiles,

rosy and pretty in handsome furs. Gay drew back a step, and put Jim forward. "Speak to her, Jim," she whispered hurriedly. She must not be the first to greet Sophy in her new home; she whose heavy secret made her feel as if she embodied disaster.

It was unnecessary to ask if Sophy was happy. Nobody that saw her could doubt it; she was overflowing with content.

She had much to tell of the pleasures of her wedding journey and the kindness of her husband. At last she had the satisfaction she had been debarred from so long—she could boast of her conjugal felicity, and she indulged with childlike enjoyment in this new delight. She chattered to Gay that evening as freely, and with as full confidence in her sym-

pathy, as if they had been sisters, and never found out that the smiles with which Gay listened cost her an effort.

She displayed the pretty things which Mr. Mildmay had lavishly bought in Paris, and presently took out of a box a fur cape, muff, and cap.

"These are for you," she said gleefully. "They are James's present. He thought of them quite by himself. And I got you such a lovely evening gown. People will see now how good-looking you are. You shall be properly dressed; and I do think you will almost beat Mabel; for, really, Adelaide has very little notion of dress."

Gay looked at the furs, at the gowns and bonnets lying about, at Sophy's flushed, happy face—such a child she was, spite of her thirty years—and suddenly flung her

arms round the frivolous, affectionate little woman.

"Oh, Sophy, I love you!" she cried passionately. "I do love you!"

END OF VOL. I.

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